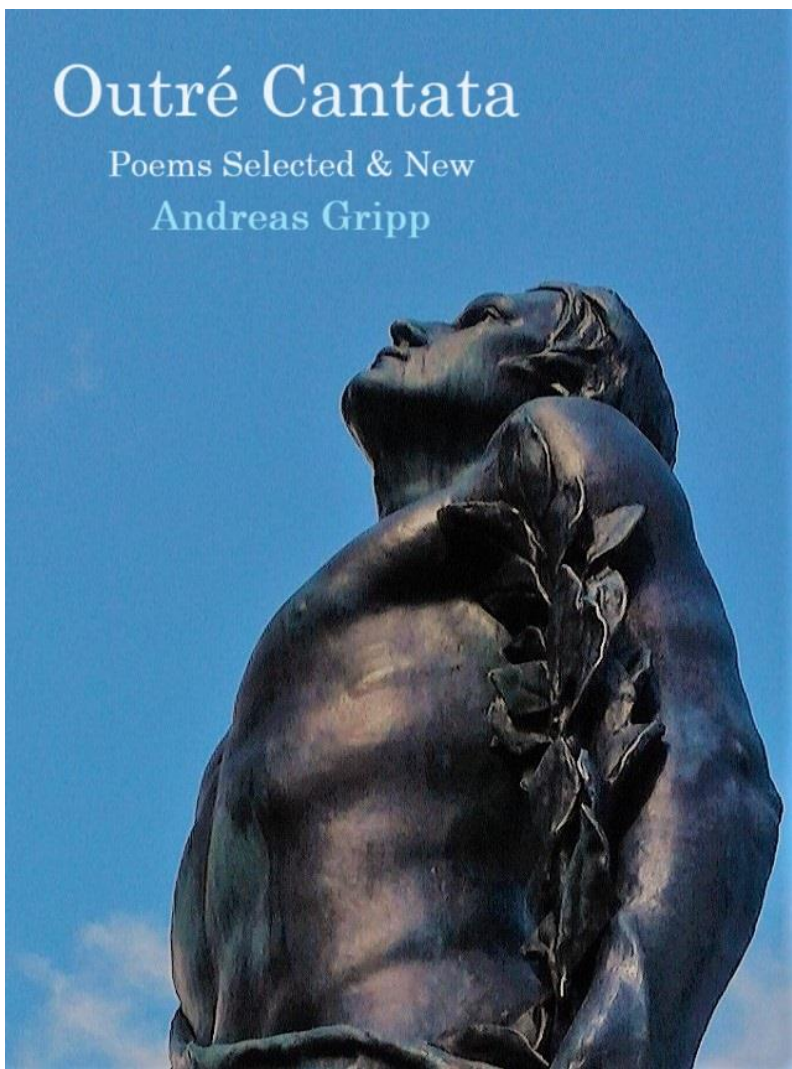


# Outré Cantata

Poems Selected & New

Andreas Gripp



# **Outré Cantata**

Poems Selected and New

**Fourth Edition**

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# Outré Cantata

Poems Selected and New  
Fourth Edition

Andreas Gripp

Beliveau Books  
LONDON

*Outré Cantata: Poems Selected and New*

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**Beliveau Books 4th Digital Edition**

November 2024

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Published by Beliveau Books, London, Ontario

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Text font is Calibri 11pt.

Front Cover Photo: Andreas Gripp

End Page Photo: Andreas Gripp

Dedication Page Photo: unknown

Printed in Canada by Lulu Press

Dépôt Légal/Legal Deposit: Bibliothèque et Archives Canada/Library and Archives Canada, 2024.

ISBN 978-1-927734-42-1

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*For my mother, Maria*

## **November Rose**

It's a Jane or Johnny-come-lately,  
the solitary rose in my garden,  
a harvest holdover or belated bloom  
that's risen when the others have died.

It has none to compete for attention,  
isn't lost in a sea of red.

I ponder its predicament,  
think of it as lonely,  
regretting it didn't blossom sooner  
when the buzz of flying insects  
were droning their affection.

I'll water it in the evening,  
as stars speck the sky in Autumn's cool.  
I'll sing it to sleep  
as I retire,  
pray for grace  
should the frost strike swift.

## Metronome

You never had a clock  
within your home,  
just a single metronome,  
keeping tempo  
more important  
than the time,

its clicks a call to dance,  
without the chains  
of *start* and *stop*,  
that never  
issue edicts  
to awaken,  
no pre-set ring  
to jolt  
from peaceful dreams,

no big and little hands  
that point to numbers  
which command,  
saying *when* it's time to eat  
and when to leave,  
*when* to walk the dog  
or check for mail,

just a steady, rhythmic beat  
of unfettered sound,  
the passing of the hours  
all unnamed.

## **The girl I would have married**

The girl I would have married  
had we met  
is on the other side of the street,  
a walking blur  
I only notice for a second.

And her hair is a shade of blonde  
or maybe brown I can't recall,  
nor anything about the jacket  
she'd been wearing nor the boots,  
only that for some silly unknown reason  
we would have married had we met,

maybe at the bookshop  
where I would have bumped her arm,  
said sorry for my clumsiness,  
which caused her to drop her classics  
and a dictionary too;

or it may have been at a party,  
hosted by a mutual  
friend,  
finding that we shared  
a favourite song,  
or that we're social  
democrats,

or that neither of us  
can stand  
the sight of blood;

then again, it may have been something  
random,  
her seated in the row  
just ahead,  
in a theatre  
with a paltry slope,  
her failure to remove the hat  
that blocked my view,  
my gathering the brazen courage  
to tap her shoulder,  
whisper into her ear  
that I'm unable to see a thing.

**My Cat Is Half-Greek,  
or Zeus Left the Acropolis Open Again**

My cat communes  
with the mythical, with the infinite  
and glorious invisible,  
getting an inside track  
on the weather  
and when the sky's  
about to change its tune.

My cat leaps up and tells me  
*whenever* it's about to rain,  
by the way she wiggles her whiskers  
and tilts her head  
beside the bathroom wall.

My cat instinctively knows  
when it's going to pour  
in Noachian proportions,  
when the neighbours  
will pound the door  
and beseech us to let them in,  
their basements flooded  
and the water still rising.

Silly cat, tumbling around  
with slanted head  
and twitching whiskers—

I'm only turning on the shower.  
Go back to your bed of sleep—  
and *dream*  
of chasing moths  
in the garden,  
the sun brighter  
than an Orion Nova  
and your shadow in pursuit  
as you run.

Let's not talk of storms today  
despite the warnings  
you sense from above:

Perhaps those sounds you hear  
are the thunderous applause  
from the pantheons up from their seats,  
as Taurus snags the matador;

the rumbling  
that of Hercules in hunger,  
starving for the love of Deianeira,  
she who brings his eyes  
to overflow  
with spit and drizzle,

a few simple sobs  
to remind us men and beasts  
that the deities too  
feel that which pains us all,  
blotting out the sun  
when there's none to share  
their sorrow.

Or it may only be Aphrodite  
calling you in  
for your dinner,  
unaware you have a home  
with *me*,  
cavorting with the mortals  
since we bow to your meows  
and your purrs,  
our closest, intimate link  
to both the eternal  
and the divine.

## **Before You Die**

*Before You Die*, it seems,  
has been springing up in bookstores  
all over the place.

“1001 Movies to See Before You Die” —  
double-faced in Performing Arts.

“1001 *Places* to See Before You Die” —  
yields a tepid trudge to Travel.

And every genre,  
it seems, has its own  
Arabian Nights-inspired thing to do  
*before* the hooded hangman calls:

“1001 Foods to Eat *Before You Die*”

“1001 Albums to Hear *Before You Die*”

“1001 Books to Read

*Before*

*You*

*Die.*”

It’s worth noting  
that with all this talk of death,  
the titles continue to fly  
and booksellers can scarcely keep up.

Maybe that's due to the fact  
that you're never, ever told  
exactly *how* you'll die,  
for it's unlikely you'll see:

"1001 Dances to Learn  
*Before You Develop Cancer*"

or

"1001 Liqueurs to Drink  
*Before You Get Hit by a Train*"

OR

"1001 Puzzles to Solve  
*Before You Get Shot in the Head.*"

Perhaps we prefer that Death  
keep its *own* swell of incense,  
its *own* black curtain,  
its *own* cryptic crossword,  
one not deciphered  
by reader or writer alike.

But why that extra *one* after *one thousand*?  
That little bonus, as a P.S. or encore—  
to make amends  
for the penultimate trip or film?

Where you're much too anxious  
about your impending expiry  
to *enjoy* that stroll in Oahu ...  
too *perturbed* about your nearing demise  
to *laugh* through *A Day at the Races* ...

and only Banks' *allusion*  
to *The Sweet Hereafter*  
will make that final book  
even tolerable.

## Upon Our Awakening

Upon our awakening,  
you ask why men  
want sex  
first thing in the morning.

It was merely a kiss  
on your arm.  
You read a tad  
too much  
into it,  
not *good morning love*,  
*did you sleep well?*  
but *dear god*  
*I need to fuck*  
like a dam about to burst  
or that final moment  
on earth,  
when you only have seconds  
to live,  
before the fabled flash of light,  
then cinders.

## **Penny-Farthing**

You sense I'm not impressed  
with your selection.

It's antique, you say  
and British at that.

I will not be seen  
on such a bicycle as this,  
its front wheel a mammoth  
and its rear a mere mouse.

Unloved by me it will wilt,  
from encroaching rust  
and loathing,  
like the bicycle built for two  
which you despised,  
the one I acquired  
for a pittance and a pence,  
dreaming we had desire  
by which to ride,  
turning corners  
without a care.

## **Initials**

After you left,  
I carved our initials  
into the stump of a fallen tree.  
I tallied its age before death,  
thought of its stunted remnant  
as a trunk, soaring  
to swirling heights, with arms  
that housed the bliss of many birds,  
our love now wrapped in the rings  
that spoke of years, to a time  
when heart and bark and wing  
were very much alive.

## Another Hallmark Moment

On Valentine's,  
I didn't think of hearts  
but of shamrocks,  
of St. Patrick,  
the lush and kelly greens  
of the Irish,  
the luck that clovers bring.

So leave your blood-filled, beating  
organ at the door  
and your chocolates, flowers, with it.  
Let me pine for almost Spring  
and a romp under leaves,  
through grasses.  
You can have your snowy day  
and diamonds, pearls, to go.  
You can have your lover's kiss  
and night of heated sex—

No, I'm lying.  
Forgive me, Triune God,  
and Mr. & Mrs. O'Shea.  
Your time has not yet come,  
for I need to *hold* and *be* held,  
love and *be* loved and *make* love,  
and dream of Dublin another day,  
another month, when the vestige of red  
has melted with the white.

## Early Morning Rain

In the yard,  
you felt sorry for the slug  
that crept so slowly up the stem  
of one of your greens.

*Poor thing,  
it doesn't even have a shell  
to call a home.*

Afterward,  
I compared it with its cousin,  
the snail, several of which will  
gather in the garden  
after an early morning rain—

sturdy,  
in the swirly cave it carries  
on its back,  
a place to retract its head in  
when it pours,

feigning it isn't there, perhaps,  
should a desperate, homeless mollusk  
come to call,  
knowing there *isn't*  
any room  
for two,

and yet burdened  
by that extra weight,  
its inability to travel  
wherever it may wish,  
at its turtle-like, sloth-like pace,  
like a car that's always pulling  
a camper/trailer,

never having the mettle  
to face the world  
when things get tough,  
even ducking in its hovel  
when there isn't a cloud  
in the sky.

## Nine

There's a beauty to our numbers  
that I note with admiration:

the shape of cipher 6  
and its curving, crescent close;

8, with its weaving, double loop  
that skaters strive and scratch to mimic;

3, and its ability to complete,  
to divide as trilogy, to *manifest*  
as Trinity;

1 which finds the wholeness  
in *itself*, never wishing to *flee*  
its core or essence,  
for the sake of multiplying:

*One times one times one  
will always equal one.*

2 is the sum of love  
and the most romantic of all  
our digits,  
and in terms of teaching math,  
it gives a break to all our children:

*Two times two is four,  
and the answer's the same  
when adding.*

7 is Biblical,  
the week for God's creation,  
the length of telling tales  
of *Harry Potter*,  
of *Narnia*,  
the complement of 12.

5, the Books of Moses,  
the fingers and thumb  
on our hands,  
giving us ability,  
the gift of grasp  
and molding, making shapes  
from slabs of clay.

4, a pair of couplets,  
the voice of poems  
and song, the rhythm  
and march of the saints.

Yet when I come to number 9,  
my spirit starts to sink:

it has such *lofty* expectations,  
aspiring to reach new levels,  
only to fall so painfully short—

missing the mark of 10  
by just a meagre, single stroke;  
always being known for  
“almost there,”  
remembered for the glory  
it could have gained  
but never got,  
its cousins—  
19, 49, 69—  
bearing the brunt  
of all its failings.

99 is but a stepping stone,  
a grating *lapse* towards 100,  
a number we only *watch* while it rolls,  
a humble *countdown* to celebration,  
unable to give us merit on its own.

I spent all of '99  
*yearning* for 2000,  
anticipating a new millennium,

the fears, excitement  
we thought awaited us  
in a dawning, changing world,

never enjoying the year for what it was,  
practicing the writing  
of an exotic date—

January 1, 2000

and eager to see  
the masthead of that early morning paper,

ridding myself of the nines  
that only accentuate defeat,

thinking I'll *pass* some kind of threshold,  
a singing, flowered archway  
bidding *come, enter,*  
*leave what troubles you*  
*behind.*

## The Decoy

My hunter friend,  
the one I haven't converted  
to my "animals-have-feelings-too"  
frame of mind,  
uses  
a wooden decoy  
in an attempt  
to lure some ducks,

the painted, smiling duplicate  
successful  
in its duty:  
three already shot today,  
bagged and ready to carve.

If objects had living souls,  
I wonder how it would feel:

a *traitor*,

causing the *death*  
of what it mimics,

floating on water  
like a wannabe bird,  
even feign it could fly  
if it *wanted* to,

have its pick  
of choicest mates;

like *Pinocchio*,  
eager to be turned  
into the real thing,

hoping its rifle-bearing  
Gepetto  
will make it  
flesh and bone,  
allow  
a brook of blood to pump  
throughout  
its winding veins,

pray it might *even*  
bring salvation  
to this hunter's  
calloused heart,

spot a chance  
at its own redemption,

have its maker  
see its feathered shape  
as something  
more than food.

## Raking Leaves with Anneliese

She holds open  
ruptured bags  
as I heave  
loads of coloured  
leaves  
into their crinkled,  
paper mouths  
like a backhoe  
dropping dirt  
into a pit.

*The Stasi  
took my father  
into the night,  
she firmly sighs.  
I sent letters  
to the prison  
but I never heard  
a word.*

I note golden,  
scarlet foliage,  
fallen  
like unpicked apples.  
Some have twisting  
worms, limp  
as flimsy laces

on my loosely-knotted  
shoes.

She says *mother*  
*stayed in sackcloth,*  
*with a veil*  
*that wouldn't lift*  
*in public places.*

November's  
biting wind  
scatters half  
our work away,  
our faces  
turning numb  
in waning light.

**Fabric Carnations,  
or My Dog was a Vegetarian**

The flowers in my house are a fraud,  
marigolds that never wither,  
forsythia forever fake  
with vibrant yellow  
that doesn't fade,  
daisies dotted about  
as if I had an eternal supply,  
the faint of sight  
and squinters  
never guessing  
the awful truth,  
nor those who call, congested,  
unaware  
they're counterfeit.

For years, *before* I built  
what's bogus,  
this simulated sham of silk,  
every bluebell, phlox and lily  
were rich in wondrous  
redolence,

concealing the smell of "Spot" —  
my shaggy, shedding dog  
with neither blotch  
nor original name,

who'd eat the roses  
when in season,  
plucking petals  
when backs were turned.

The dog was mine for a decade,  
had a couch he claimed as his own,  
an old stuffed cat  
with which he played  
but never thought  
to bite or chew.

When he died,  
I was told to go back  
to blooms, genuine,  
the ones that I'd discarded  
after "Spot" had overate,

rid the rooms of imitations,  
inhale the fragrant scent  
of life.

It's *all* a fabrication  
I replied: aromas  
from the freshly  
cut, telling the world  
they're bleeding,

their beauty-in-a-vase,  
embalming;

that flowers too  
love living  
as much as a man  
or departed pet,

that my *forgeries*  
are better,  
no perfumes  
to pronounce what's dead.

## Aardvark

And there he is again,  
on the very first page of  
every Merriam-Webster,  
the top of the list of  
*Animalia*,  
the Everest of his kind;

*Aaron*, if he were human,  
dismissing as jealousy  
his rivals' cry of "cheat,"  
that the double A  
is so superfluous,  
he's *no* transistor battery  
or city on the Danish coast;

and if he could scream,  
a pirate's *aargh!*

as if on a ship of stolen  
gold, strutting haughtily, as though  
he'd a mane of the same colour,  
asking disdainfully, *just WHO*  
*is the King of beasts?*

## **The Birth of Lovely Veronica**

On the morning you were born,  
covered with film,  
coated with the remnants  
of your cocooned state in the womb,  
a knife was lodged  
in Thomas Murphy's chest,  
stopping his heart  
with the hardness of steel,  
and the thug who cruelly robbed him  
ran into a sheeted night  
of just-fallen rain,  
in that nebulous wetness  
that remains  
before wind and air  
dry each drop to nothingness.

On the morning you were born,  
you cried your first cry,  
and Kim Yung cowered  
in a solitary cell,  
awaiting another visit  
from the torturers,  
the ones who never forget  
Tiananmen Square  
or his shoutings  
that Mao was dead.  
He wishes *he* were dead,

that someone on this earth  
gave a goddamn,  
that today they'd just finish the job.

This morning, when you were born,  
a Sudanese mother  
cradled  
her skin/bone son,  
rocked him  
in her shrivelled arms,  
sang *return you now to Heaven*  
in her own, raspy tongue  
while nurses cleaned *you* off,  
prepared you for our smiles,  
our initial touch and kisses,  
our deceiving ourselves  
and the world  
that you're in a safer, *better* place  
than a mother's cave of calm  
or the planes of ghosts  
and gods.

## Psalm for Aquarius

In the days and nights  
of my naiveté,  
when hope blasted blue  
in carbon cloud,  
the constellations  
stepped out of line,  
formed new patterns,  
gave my dreams names  
that they'd discarded:

*Pisces, someday she'll adore you,  
hold your hanging head  
beside her breast,  
pluck out poisoned hooks  
inside your heart.*

And of love, it lost  
its battle with beauty,  
lives on to cut to the quick,  
chain the *soul*  
in heavy iron,  
to thrash hopelessly,  
like fish in a sweeping net,  
then hauled to shore  
while salvation ripples beneath,  
so cold in all its glory.

## Hearing Ted Hughes at Plunkenworth's

Our friend dropped in again,  
the one who always says  
he's met some rather famous poets,  
like Billy Collins, Rita Dove,  
Molly Peacock,  
boasting he's taken them out for beer,  
that in their drunken state  
they've read his work  
and said it was the best damn thing  
they've ever seen on paper.

It's been difficult to prove him a liar,  
authors and their tours  
have coincided with his claims  
but this time he was sloppy,  
saying he'd heard Ted Hughes  
last night, at Plunkenworth's,  
the run-down, downtown gallery  
that exhibits skateboard  
art and molds of vomit  
by its barely-on-its-hinges  
front door.

He's been dead more than two decades,  
we said, snickering, knowing we finally  
found the lie,  
that he'd admit it's been a charade,

the name-dropping, the tales  
of autographed books  
(that we've *never* been allowed  
to see).

But he didn't blink an eye,  
unfazed, undaunted in his delivery,  
saying that Ted had read  
a dozen new poems,  
one about Plath,  
how he would have *rushed*  
to save her,  
turn off the oven,  
inhaled the toxic fumes  
himself  
if he only could,  
calling it "Sylvie's Stove,"  
and we corrected him,  
saying it was *Sylvia*, not *Sylvie*  
and he said no,  
that was an affectionate name  
he had for her, very French  
as he really loved the language,

that he'd come back from the grave  
just to read it,

even if but a single person  
listened, believed  
that he was sorry,

that the dead  
could be so sorry.

## Francesca, Weeding the Garden

My daughter, all of six  
and bursting with a Big Bang  
sort of energy,  
zigzags across our fenced backyard,  
picking dandelions she holds  
in her fist,  
for an "I love you daddy" bouquet,  
like the lofty ones  
I snagged for her mother  
before the tumors took her away,  
their sunny heads of yellow  
jutting freely from curling fingers,  
my steady, sturdy voice  
now a downcast, trembling shell,  
saying *they last a little longer*  
*than flowers,*  
*we'll wish you better*  
*when they turn to spores.*

## Strings of the Great Depression

In your chair,  
covered in a shawl to warm you,  
*hot* milk by your side,

arthritic, gnarled fingers  
pulling limply  
on elastics  
(ones that held  
your meds together),

you speak of your farmer-father,  
coming home  
without the radio  
he'd promised,

and of rubber bands,  
how he stretched them  
over a can,  
plucking them  
with his thumb.

*For music*, he said,  
*while you eat.*

## La Belle

*La pomme de terre,*  
the potato, the earth apple,  
its womb a warmth of ground,  
unable to tempt the eyes  
of unfallen man.

The apple, *la pomme,*  
kept cool among the branches  
by an evening's autumn sky,  
painted so very often,  
the centre of our lore.

In French they're more poetic,  
sounding  
that much better  
on the ear,  
no bitter taste  
that settles  
on the tongue,  
no judgement on their worth.

*Le poème,*  
the poem,  
that hovers in the vacant space  
between,  
the fruit of ground and tree,

the one I wish I'd render  
*en Français*,  
to mask the many flaws  
that come when beauty  
can't be seen.

## América

The isthmus  
was the adhesive  
always holding us  
together,

like fraternal twins  
conjoined,  
locked  
by a crooked rib.

And *though* it looked  
quite thin,  
brittle and ready to  
snap,

the mightiest ships  
of imperial fleets  
could only  
turn away,

to round Cape  
Horn at a crawl,  
to meet Pacific waves.

*El Canal de Panamá,*  
christened in  
'14,

in the summer  
of the Serbian  
shot.

Yes,  
this brings us Yen  
and Yuan.

Yes,  
this hews in half  
the journey.

But brother,  
earthen-brother,

your breath  
is not as close,

and strangers  
sail the space  
between our scars.

## The Language of Sparrows

Your sister is dead.

We plant seedlings  
by her grave in April,  
when Spring seduces  
with all its promise,  
moisten the ground  
with a jug of water  
and say how, years from now,  
a bush will burst and flower,  
be home to a family of sparrows,  
each knowing the other by name.

I ask you if birds have names,  
like *Alice, Brent, Jessica* and *James*,  
if mother and father bird  
call them in when it rains,  
say *settle here in branches*  
*amid the leaves that keep you dry—*  
not in English, mind you,  
or any other human tongue  
but in the language of sparrows;  
each trill, each warbling,  
a repartee,  
a crafted conversation of the minds.

I then notice  
that we never see the birds  
when it rains,  
how they disappear in downpours,  
seeking shelter  
in something we simply cannot see.

When we're old,  
when we come to remember  
the loved one that you've lost,  
they'll be shielded in our shrub,  
not a short and stunted one,  
but a *grand*, blessed growth,  
like the one that spoke to Moses,  
aflame, uttering  
I AM WHO I AM,

one that towers,  
dense with green,  
a monument  
to the sister you treasured  
and to the birds  
that she adored,  
naming the formerly fallowed, *hallowed*,  
sacred, *remove your shoes*,  
Spirits and Sparrows dwell  
and sibilate secrets  
we're unworthy to hear.

**My lover hates Roy Clark  
but hasn't heard of Sufjan Stevens**

My composition of song,  
for you, has been rejected,  
not because the sentiments  
were bad, or the structure  
of verse and chorus,  
but that I played the chords  
on a banjo  
when I should have used a guitar.

You say the *banjo*  
is a trite,  
hee-hawed thing,  
for barefoot, hick-town loafers  
with dangling straw  
between their teeth.

I'd like to change the words,  
dedicate it to another,  
one who doesn't ridicule  
the music of the mountain,  
one who'd know its origins,  
before Burl Ives' arrival.

*Bania*,  
in the Mandingo tongue,

from the minstrels  
of the African west,  
whose moonlight lovers  
never shunned  
their poignant serenades.

## Winter Solstice

Christmas  
with an ex-lover  
is spent whenever  
there's time to spare,

so *today* I invited you over,  
with the promise of friendship  
and fire,  
hoping for kindling wood,

but the flames are merely embers,  
like the Sun in its tepid glow,  
forsaking us much too soon  
on this shortest day of the year.

So I'll make you Darjeeling,  
my darling,  
suddenly *clasp* your hand  
into mine—

for gauging a glove size, I'll say,  
*feigning* I've shopping to do,  
the warmth of tea and touch  
creating such a beautiful lie.

## The Astronomer

Even on the eve of June  
you're early,  
your telescope set by six o'clock  
to *scan* the roofless sphere,  
as you used to do with your child  
before the day she succumbed  
to sickness,  
*before* her locks of hair fell out  
and your lulling-to-slumber stories  
were heard by eager, itching ears.

She'd said from the hospital bed  
her ghost would guide you  
to discover—  
stars and worlds  
not seen by a sea  
of billions and billions  
of eyes,

when the hues of tranquil sky  
have come to lose  
their sun-birthed blue,

become  
the midnight black  
that's needed for light  
to speak from afar.

## **Preservation**

You've stopped  
coming over of late,  
sensing I've crossed  
some sort of line,  
saying you want to preserve  
our friendship,  
this affection of another kind  
we can't describe,  
our sibling-like rapport,  
this anything-but-fall-in-love  
that's protected just one of us,  
the other silently smitten,  
burning when our touch  
is accidental.

## Omnipotence

*I, more stolidly, tend to suspect that God  
is a novelist—a garrulous and deeply  
unwholesome one too.*

—Martin Amis

As a novelist, you say,  
you have the powers  
of a god,  
the death and life  
of characters  
in your potent, scribing hand—

deciding who is loved  
and who survives,

who is buried  
or burnt to ash,

strewn into the Ganges,  
perhaps,

or left to rest  
in a marble urn  
over a family's  
fireplace.

Piddling details  
aside,  
let's promote the *poet*  
to the omnipotent Lord of yore,  
a God unmatched by others,

mould the *world*  
to what it really should have been  
(from the start of *Genesis*),

when the Spirit hovered  
over the waters' face;

make a *Pangaea*  
that never splits,  
do away with all division,

trim the *claws* of carnivores,  
let the lions chew the grapes  
of flowered fields,

and if that's asking way too much,  
at least allow your hero  
the saving *kiss* of his beloved—

do not let him  
drink himself  
to a shrivelled, pitied state,

nor *allow* his neck  
to fit into  
your frayed and knotted noose;

show the mercy you believe  
you never got,  
show the dead  
and deities  
how it could have been much better  
(if only *you*  
had been in charge),

and do not await a Messiah's  
return  
to get the work that's needed  
done—

do it now  
and do it quickly,

in the loving,  
triune lines  
of your haiku.

## Miracle

Tonight I will ask you to marry me.  
You will surely say I am mad,  
in the British sense of the word,  
and then laugh off my promise to love  
and commit as I-must-have-stopped-over-  
at-the-pub-and-had-a-few-too-many  
before our coffee date on this insignificant  
middle-of-the-week kind of evening.

But this day is anything but ordinary:  
Look at my hands, they are stained  
from painting my kitchen the colour  
that is your favourite  
even though my eyesight is failing,  
and I'm convinced that both our God  
and the birds have given us their blessing  
as shoots sprouted in my garden overnight  
from seeds dropped from above  
and the weather person on TV  
said there'd be no rain  
for the next seven Saturdays to come.

## **Hildegard's Tomb**

I offered to go with you,  
to the mausoleum,  
thinking you'd said "museum,"  
believing we'd gaze at vases  
and cracking busts  
made by the dead;  
instead we entered a corridor  
filled with corpses filed in rows,  
inscriptions engraved  
by the living  
in a climate-controlled  
grave,  
and I wondered which was better  
in terms of art,  
immortality.

### Coda III

That page at the end of my notebook,  
the one that is blank,  
is the best poem of mine you've ever read,  
you say to me as I choose which to keep,  
which to toss and pretend I never wrote.

*I went through it  
when you were away, you reveal  
in a tone bereft of innocence,  
like a boy boasting to his friends  
that he managed to swig some vodka  
when his parents were in the basement,  
perhaps sorting through laundry  
or checking on the furnace  
or doing something that required him  
to be cunning and to seize the moment  
like a vulture that dives to the ground  
while the corpse is still warm enough  
to pass for something living.*

*Your metaphors are silly, you say bluntly,  
your analogies make me laugh—  
those of scavenger, Russian drink,  
mischievous youth.*

*Take the last sheet in your book,  
the one without any writing:  
it made more sense than anything else  
you've rambled on about.*

I reply that you are right,  
that pallid vacancy and lines of blue  
have more to say than verbosity,  
that I should just write "white"  
instead of "pallid,"  
that I misread my spiny thesaurus,  
that what is simplest  
is most complex  
and lives in a realm  
no words can elucidate  
or yield direction to;

that it's a sign of literary innovation  
to have an entire volume  
of nothing but lined paper,  
that the next time I buy a notebook  
I'm best off to merely scrawl my name  
upon its cover  
and wait for the accolades to pour in  
from those who know the work of a genius  
when they see it.

## The Fall

I sigh at the sight  
of the moth I find so lifeless  
in the garden,  
rarely noting  
its beating white  
in the days or weeks gone past,

and my friend who'd passed away,  
from a toxic mix, concocted,  
said the reason why  
he longed for death  
was to grasp the love  
he'd missed while still a-breath,

that after you have died,  
others speak well of you,  
spill eulogies of praise,  
cry that you'll be missed,  
say your poems were *beautiful*,  
your paintings, *works of art*,

that all the things you'd ever done  
are now *immortalized*,  
once ignored, *beatified*,

that he didn't want to take his life  
*because* he loathed the sun,  
its warmth upon his face  
or the birdsong of the dawn,

but in the *hope*  
he'd somehow feel  
the intangible touch  
of love,

its too-little, too-late  
arrival,  
its better-than-never embrace,

its invisible kiss that's heard  
when someone weeps  
at the foot of your grave.

## Marooning the Muse

We sat at the beach *together*  
but I didn't write a thing.  
I looked to the horizon  
and its meeting of sky and sea  
and the cerulean they both shared  
at the point where we see  
the world is round indeed.

You wrote of sandpipers  
on the strand and the seagulls  
encircling the trawler  
traversing the harbour,

and I left you the metaphors  
to find while I was lost in a reverie  
that had Magellan meeting  
Eratosthenes  
on the edge of a precipice,  
saying yes, it's all an illusion,  
this vortex of birds and their fish,  
this looping of ships and our poems.

## The West Coast of Somewhere

As a boy, I saw only sand and sea  
and stones I pitched with a splash  
beneath the shifting animal clouds  
that I envisioned.

As a single young man  
on a day of sun and cirrus,  
I knew nothing of rocks  
and waves colliding with the shore,  
only the flash of skin and curves  
exposed for browning.

Now middle-aged in wedlock,  
ambling along the beach  
beside my wife,  
I see the patterns on pebbles  
and the gulls that dip for trout  
while the crew of college girls,  
jumping for *frisbees* in the surf,  
are supposedly a blur below  
this cumulus of savannah cats  
overseeing their great,  
ephemeral kingdom.

## Fidelity

*This is the fluid in which we meet each other,  
This haloey radiance that seems to breathe  
And lets our shadows wither  
Only to blow  
Them huge again, violent giants on the wall.  
One match scratch makes you real.*

—Sylvia Plath, “By Candlelight”

Our shadows, faithful followers,  
super glued to our  
forms—  
ever-loyal,

whether we’re good  
or whether we’re not,

and there—  
if the right  
kind of light  
will allow—  
in our lovemaking,  
our murders,  
our scaling of mountains  
and stairs,

and here, leaping  
off a trestle,  
when all's become too much—

see one dive  
towards the river,  
disappearing  
in water's crest,  
engulfed below the  
ripples,  
in darkness  
where flame is lost.

### Third Trimester

The Beatles are on Sullivan  
and I'm about to be born.  
There is no correlation  
other than my mother  
is watching them on television,

and though my eyes are developed  
by now, they're closed inside her womb  
but I swear I'm hearing something  
with these new ears of mine  
that I've never heard before  
(not only this thing called "music"  
but the frenzied screams  
of American girls);

and yes, once I've entered the world,  
the melodies meant for me  
will be simple and patronizing,  
designed to soothe,  
make me slumber,  
and I'll wail, scrunch my face  
instead, demanding, in my own  
wordless way, that the mobile  
above me start to chime  
*She Loves You Yeah Yeah Yeah.*

## Interlopers

I cannot be sure that the birds  
and the squirrels—let alone the big racoon  
that climbs down from the belatedly budding  
tree—are the same characters  
who I used to see then didn't  
through months of frozen landscape  
when, I imagine, the mammals  
were in some sort of hibernating state  
or at least taking it rather easily  
in their primitive burrows while the birds  
were in Florida sunning themselves  
and drinking premium water from a fountain.

I feel they'd be offended  
if I said "welcome back"—  
that they'd believe I think they all look alike,  
that they might be here for the very first time  
and I've mistaken them for last year's gang,  
that the food I'm leaving  
as a token of friendship  
wouldn't be their first choice on the menu,  
that a would-be friend wouldn't assume  
they're all the same  
and that they could easily pick me out  
of a crowd of 100,000 people  
within a second of doubtless wonder.

## Flower Children

It's hard to believe that crotchety old man  
and his wife hobbling into the store  
where I work were once hippies.  
Their faces creased like a shirt  
I forgot to put in the dryer  
and had no time to iron, the man's pants  
pulled up to his chest and his wife muttering  
something about the pie she has to bake  
for the Sunday church social.

I try to picture them at Woodstock,  
a farmer's soggy field overrun  
by painted young ladies  
showing their bouncing, naked breasts  
at a time of dawning liberation,  
the man then bearded without the faintest  
hint of grey and both of them smoking pot  
and waiting for Jefferson Airplane  
to hit the stage.

I can't imagine them  
listening to acid rock  
or Led Zeppelin's vinyl debut  
with its flaming Hindenburg crashing  
to a hellish death in New Jersey.

I can't see the man swapping his  
Arnold Palmer polo shirt  
for a psychedelic tie-dye  
and the woman with her midriff  
bare and smooth, a peace sign  
above her navel.

They ask if they can pay by cheque,  
that they've never sent an email  
when I suggest our online specials,  
that they've yet to see our Facebook page  
and that Instagram is something  
they never would have imagined  
when they rolled in the mud over  
half a century ago, dancing  
as if they would never age a day.

### **Priscilla, Asleep**

I've noticed,  
whenever you roll to your side,  
you take much of the blanket  
with you,

my legs and feet bereft,

left bare  
but ready to run,

into some sentry owl's  
night,

through ethereal  
sheers of fog,

should I renew  
my dream of old,

our missing  
child's  
*help,*

with neighbours  
roused  
by ruckus,

the slaps  
of a shoeless  
dash.

## Cassiopeia

On our anniversary,  
we spend the evening  
gazing at the stars

yet not as lovers do,  
making wishes  
on ones that fall,  
but imagining instead  
there's an alien couple  
on some distant  
speck-of-a-world,

not quite as human as us,  
with a few of their organs  
flipped around,  
but still the kind of people  
we'd relate to,

not as deeply "in love"  
as before,  
yet *enough*  
to never leave  
the other,

and we wonder  
if they think  
they'd each be happier  
in the arms of another,

if they too  
have awkward silence  
in the aftermath  
of a quarrel,

if they believe that they can last,  
at least, until the offspring  
are all grown up,

if they envision  
what it would feel like  
to have their spouse,  
unexpectedly,  
pass away,

and if they'd ever survive  
a frigid night  
looking *up* at the sky  
without them.

## **A Place Beneath the Water**

We drive to the beach  
the day you're released  
from the hospital,  
the pills afloat in your glass  
currently a memory  
taken by tides;

and I suggest a brief, brisk swim  
in cleansing waves,  
to wash the stress  
from your battered mind,  
and you strip-down rather hastily,  
splash about as a child might,  
as you did when you were a girl,

and I lose sight of you  
in a panic of thirty seconds,  
as you submerge your head  
and hold your breath  
for a protracted half-a-minute,  
attempting to touch  
that part of yourself  
where the air cannot reach  
nor light tell the world  
what you've hid.

## **Minus 21 and falling**

It is colder than before,  
the other night  
I complained of chills,  
and frost embossed  
on windowpanes;

that which they call *cancer*  
eating away my insulation.

Bring me a second sweater,  
my cherub. Wrap me  
in scarves and a toque.  
Clothe my feet in woolly socks  
and give me tea to drink,

hot enough to warm my hands  
when they hold the steaming cup,  
but not so hot they burn  
or bring me back to vibrant nights  
we spent on other, happier things

and my hands cupped  
your breasts and ass  
and I knew nothing of the cold.

## Exhalation

*Breath is the bridge which connects life  
to consciousness, which unites your body  
to your thoughts.*

—Thich Nhat Hanh

My muses  
must have fled from me  
before  
my coffee fix,

in the crash  
of afternoon,  
my pages white  
and naked,

in clamour  
that comes  
from *nothing*,

leaving me feeling  
foiled,  
unable to pen  
my poem.

I opt instead  
for inertia,

open windows  
bringing breezes  
from the west,

sibilating  
stories  
of the sphere,

wind that carries  
exhalation  
from workers  
in the field,  
who groan  
while bending backs  
and picking rice;

from mothers  
in their push  
to birth their babes,  
and the cries that come  
the moment  
they emerge,  
cords cut,  
bottoms slapped  
with care;

from orations  
from the senates  
of the world;  
the homilies  
of the holy;  
the prayers  
of all devout;

from the schoolboy  
spouting love  
into the ears  
of his first  
crush;

an alcoholic's  
song of rote  
into a stumbling,  
crooked night;

the death-bed gasps  
of the sick and grey  
in the seconds  
before they die;

from a waitress  
and her drag  
on cigarette,

in her too-short break  
from servitude;

from all the creatures  
of the forests  
of the earth,  
the hunters and their prey,  
the yelps and screams  
of the kill;

by the will  
of currents, carried,

co-mingled in jet-  
stream,

abating breath  
that lightly ruffles  
the adjacent  
chimes and sheers.

*Poetry*, it heaves.

*This*  
*is poetry.*

## The Fence

On the other side of the fence,  
the neighbour's grass is lush  
and weedless. I see him kissing  
his stunning wife, tenderly,  
without hesitation.

On the other side of the fence,  
I see the public school  
where children tumble,  
laugh, dust themselves off.  
Recess comes twice daily,  
and at lunch the shouts  
are louder.

On the other side of the fence,  
I see the skyline miles away;  
clear glass towers  
holding clouds  
but for a moment,  
the ones that sail through sunlit blue  
and I think I see a window-washer  
dangling  
like some *Spider-Man*—  
with binoculars I make him out

and though I'd never do that job myself,  
I imagine the pulse of life  
around him  
five-hundred feet mid-air,  
his beaming face  
bouncing back at him  
from the translucent, 38<sup>th</sup> floor.

The fence  
in my backyard  
is far too high.  
I'd like to see much more,  
see what lies  
beyond the pillars  
of banks and monoliths,

the foothills in the distance  
which rise and drop,  
like breasts that lift and fall  
in heated breath,  
like those of my neighbour's wife,  
who sunbathes  
while he's away,

a *hey there* look that's thwarted  
by the noble tenth commandment  
and six feet of cottonwood.

## Watchful

—for a sculpture by Walter Allward

In the hours after dusk,  
we deduce he plots the *path*  
of distant suns, waits  
unabatedly  
for Antares to explode,  
its cradled remnants  
to feed five fetal stars,

or stares expectantly  
at the halved or crescent moon,  
hoping to behold  
a *crater's* new creation,  
amid the burst  
of meteor impact.

At the pinnacle of noon,  
we can't surmise the subject  
of his gaze, always skyward, note  
the sun should bring his eyes  
to squint and narrow, fancy  
if he's witnessed  
every shape and sort of creature  
in the clouds,

wonder if he's worried  
about *the big one*,  
the asteroid that's due  
to smite the Earth, if the flesh  
of what he emulates  
follows the fate  
of dinosaurs,

praying that some *God*  
will part his lips  
if he should spot it,  
beseech us both to kiss  
then run for cover.

## Haight-Ashbury

The temperature in our apartment  
is always moderate,  
20 Celsius, or as our friends in  
San Francisco call it, 68, never too frigid,  
too torrid, as pleasant as its people  
who birthed a twentieth-  
century love of gay and poetry,  
where Ginsberg howled  
and Ferlinghetti kept the city  
lights plugged in,  
grateful for their dead, their '67  
just a narrow notch  
before some elusive ideal  
that hovers within our reach.

You tell me to never touch  
the thermostat and I acquiesce.  
What we call *warmth* is but the middle,  
the centre of some utopia  
absent of fire and of ice.

Yes, the ground there occasionally  
quakes, much like our walls and  
ceiling do whenever the tenants  
upstairs argue about the bills  
or break into a dance  
we've been curious to behold.

## This is the Reason

I've never written you  
a love letter, as I did for the girls  
I crushed on in school,  
vowing a childish *forever love*.

I've been told that *both*  
can never truly be promised,  
there are too many variables  
upon which they can falter—

an unexpected loss  
of mind and memory,  
the foreboding phantom  
of infidelity,

that our lifespans  
are simply too long,  
the decay of what we were  
befalling while we breathe,

that the warbler outside my  
window, his years but a  
jaunt through junior high,  
says it better,

his skyward pledge  
to his treetop mate  
daily putting me to shame.

## The Carnation

The carnation I left you  
was given with much pondering—  
not as romantic, they'll say,  
as its more beloved, historic rival,  
the rose;

not as many songs and poems  
describing its allure;

without plethora  
of oil paintings  
to capture its pale pink petals  
on canvas—

but please remember, darling,  
it will last a little bit longer,  
even if but a day,  
those extra, precious hours to say  
*I love you, I'm sorry, come back to me.*

## **Tanka**

Our daughter races,  
attempting to catch the birds.  
If she had the wings  
of a pigeon, she'd leave us,  
dropping occasional notes.

### **The Ellipsis . . .**

teases amid the white,  
leaving us to guess  
what's been omitted,  
cherry-  
picking its many biases,  
filtering out the  
disparaging in every  
book and movie review.

See it there, at the start  
of a neutered sentence,  
as though the initially  
penned words  
were never scribed,  
not critical enough to share,  
like lifting a stylus  
above the grooves,

lowering it precisely  
into the record  
after the opening verse  
has been sung,  
singling out the chorus  
as if that alone  
were more than enough.

I was recently told  
I was doing it wrong,  
failing to leave a space  
between this trinity  
of dots. *It takes up  
too much room*, I replied,  
*looks peculiar on the page.*

Do not leave me  
wondering what these lines  
conceivably said,  
in the heat  
of an angry moment,  
within the quote  
of a love confessed,

this trail that leaves  
the ending to conjecture,  
a search for the  
discarded  
we were never supposed to know.

## Lionel

lays down tracks  
like he did when he was a  
kid, predating *The Neighborhood  
of Make Believe*—  
he was already in college  
by then, getting A's and getting  
laid, evading the Draft  
till the excuses had run out,  
a frontline Private  
ducking marksmen from  
the Viet Cong,

returning with his leg  
blown off and his carob skin  
scarred by the relentless spray  
of shrapnel.

Today, both the medal  
he was given and the pin  
of *Old Glory* ride in the caboose,  
behind the load of Pennsylvanian  
coal that's terribly out-of-date,

as all of it is, really: the freight  
cars disappearing into a distant  
tunnel like a rodent's tail  
that darts into drywall,

a baseboard cavity never patched,  
puffing smoke as if a gambler  
sucking on a cigar smuggled in  
from Havana when the Cold  
War brought us all to our knees,  
shuddering under our desks  
though we had told ourselves  
fervently that this is just pretend.

## Wild Bill McKeen

This village  
through which we're  
driving is home  
to "Wild Bill McKeen"

and though we haven't  
a clue who he is—  
or was—  
his name is on  
a banner in the air,  
tied to a pair of  
streetlights  
to make certain  
we'll never miss it.

The posted limit  
of speed is only  
30, and there's  
not a lot to look at  
so we defer to  
our conjectures  
as we crawl—

surmise  
he's a hockey  
player, spent his time  
in the penalty box,

a master of slash  
and slew foot,  
told the refs to  
go fuck off,  
took a piss  
on the Lady Byng.

We then travel  
back in time,  
think he may have  
robbed a coach,  
rustled cattle,  
outdrew the county  
sheriff after starting  
a barroom brawl.

We think of synonyms  
for *wild*,  
saying his hair was  
endless, unruly,  
he'd grown a beard  
from chin to foot,  
grunted like an ape,  
clutching a raw steak  
with savage hands—  
tearing off the  
pieces with his teeth.

In minutes  
we're back  
in the country, racing  
past the farms  
and grazing horses,  
say his rep  
was overblown,

mere hyperbole,

from the folks  
who've led some  
pretty boring lives,

that Wild Bill McKeen  
took his steaming  
cup of coffee  
without cream,

once jaywalked  
across the road  
while it was raining,

returning a *book*  
overdue  
by a day,

never guessing  
he'd be immortal  
on a sign,

or better yet—  
in a poem,

by someone too lazy  
to google  
his claim to fame.

## Osmosis

The way our cat  
sleeps on books  
makes us think of *osmosis*,

her head reposed  
on the cover's title,  
her paw outstretched  
over the author's name  
denoting some kind of kinship,  
as though the writer  
forged a portal  
for lazy felines  
to stealthily enter.

I've heard that whiskers  
help a cat to navigate  
the dark,  
are conductors that channel  
information to its brain  
in a manner much quicker  
than the antiquated roundabouts  
of a podium-chained professor.

Let's wake our dearest pet  
upon sufficient assimilation,  
see if she spouts some Shakespeare  
as none other than Shylock could—

or replace *The Merchant of Venice*  
with a treatise of greater use  
than a reprisal's pound of flesh,  
done in a hush that doesn't disturb,

propping *A Brief History of Time*  
beneath her chin  
and await the meows  
that otherwise beckon us  
to feed, to stroke,  
to clean her kitty  
litter,  
that speak instead  
of cosmological aeons,  
the pull of black holes,  
the deep red shift in stars  
much too far for us to see.

## The Deck

You've been  
bluffing your way  
through our friend-  
ship, the wine you've  
swigged in fifteen minutes  
making its naked presence  
known,

that the joker  
is worth  
an even dozen,  
one-up on my  
ace of hearts,  
for he vows to  
make us laugh  
at this time of  
unspoken amour,

your royal flush  
in the house of cards  
we'll construct with  
trembling hands,

while love is concealed  
like the side of the moon  
that dares not show its face,

veiled in the  
kitchen window,  
withholding  
its fevered glow.

## The Lesser Light

“Then God made two great lights:  
the greater light to rule the day,  
and the lesser light to rule the night”

—Genesis 1:16

No one writes of the moon of day,  
the one that’s overshadowed  
by the brilliance of the sun,

the one that sits in blue,  
that’s pale and white as cloud,

its craters scarcely noticed  
and its phases gone unchecked.

At noon, lovers holding hands  
do so in a golden light,  
beams that warm the faces  
locked in smiles from solar shine.

While ignored at 4pm,  
our satellite must reckon  
that its time is slowly coming,  
when its giant, yellow rival  
will sink *below* horizon’s line.

And it is *then*,  
when couples feel a chill,  
that Luna's lamp aglow  
alights their footsteps and their kiss,

*casts* a suitor's shadow  
'neath a window washed in song,

that daughters eye its pockmarks  
from their fathers' telescopes,

that poets pen their verses  
for this orb of wolf and tide,

that nature finds its way through dark  
in the shroud of a sleeping sun.

## Paris

*This* one is not so Grand  
as its river, no Seine  
cutting at its heart  
or couples arm-in-arm  
amid *je t'aime*.

We can see  
the eroding townscape  
from this crowded  
rooftop bistro,  
and there's a soufflé  
on the menu you'd like to try,  
while I scan the varied wine list  
for *Château Valfontaine*.

We made a *hard*, last-minute  
turn off the 403, figured  
Brantford would be dull,  
there's only so much  
Bell and Gretzky  
we can digest, yet again.

And substituting for a tower?  
There's the truss bridge  
serving the railway  
that traverses the muddy banks,

its lattice now a respite  
for a dozen, migrating flocks,

and, upon which, the locals say,  
some have confessed their love;  
plunged down in *ultime liberté*.

## Rx

The pharmacist I talk to  
totally gets my problem.  
I show her my prescription  
for *Joyfullix*, a new pill  
to make you feel happy  
and she gives me *beta-anaporiliovium*,  
its cheaper generic cousin that's  
the exact same thing except  
for the impossible-to-memorize  
multi-syllabic name.

To curb the pendulum of my  
mood swings, the *Abilify*  
my psych recommended  
comes to me as *apo-aripiprazole*, 5mg,  
to soon be doubled to 10.

Does this mean it will again be  
rechristened? Will *cazolipiumestroniasin*  
work just as well? If I show up at the  
desk, will my pharmacist simply shrug,  
tell me to close my eyes  
and imagine the best, the cure  
within me already, in the fantasy  
that every drug is a miracle,  
hot off the goddamn line?

## On My Literary Failure

The poem I've written isn't good enough.  
It surely won't win an award,  
be published in a magazine  
or make the list of "Selected Verse."

I don't even know why I wrote it.  
There was nothing inspiring me,  
no thoughts of a long-past love,  
no longing for a present-day face.  
To tell the truth, I was too tired  
to write anything at all,  
had considered going to bed early  
and not worrying myself about writing  
a poem—good or otherwise.

The problem is that not only is this poem  
not good, it isn't even mediocre.  
It's one of my lousier offerings, to be frank,  
and the fact that I'm even writing it at all  
breaks the unwritten rule  
about penning too many poems  
about writing poems,  
since poems about poems  
shows that the poet was too lazy  
and uninspired  
to actually write about something  
meaningful  
and instead took the easy way out.

For it's clear there's no metaphor here  
or clever devices that poets use.  
I'm just whipping out words  
with very little effort and it shows.  
It fully deserves the rejection slips  
it will undoubtedly encounter  
throughout its many travels.

It will be the filler poem,  
the last one shoved into the envelope  
to make the submission an even five.  
It will be the spare one,  
the one that's always unpublished  
and ready to go  
if an editor friend needs one,  
on short notice,  
for their third-rate Journal/Anthology,  
the one the better-known poets  
will never bother to send to.  
The kind you don't want to waste  
your "good" poems on.

I'll pretend I wrote it just for that,  
and that I made a special effort  
to do so, getting up at 3 a.m.,  
stepping lightly on my toes  
so as not to awaken the cat,

and making a cup  
of warm milk in the process  
because it's an ungodly hour  
to drink something stronger.  
That after a sip or two,  
I chose to pour it  
over a bowl of cereal  
since breakfast  
was only a few hours away  
and I needed the strength to finish.  
That I struggled until dawn  
over every word, comma,  
line-break,

and if a rival poet that I know  
happens to see this wretched piece,  
I'll blame an overcast sky  
for its vapid state,  
its piss-poor stanzas,  
spoil the sunrise I was waiting for  
and a subject other than this,

saying my poem about the night  
yielding to day,  
about the ever-elusive muse  
I nearly caught,  
would have been glorious  
if not for that.

### **The Way in Which I Prefer My Demise:**

by drowning in the Pacific,  
not because it's pleasant  
(like dying in my sleep  
during some subconscious,  
midnight reverie),  
this under-the-surface  
suffocation,

but for the reason that  
if I ever did come back,  
as the Buddhists and  
Hindus say I will,  
I'd want to live in the sea,  
its relative calm and serenity,  
its teal and aquamarine,  
with humans seldom to be seen,  
my hands but fins  
and a caudal for feet,

and death, should it come calling  
once again, taking merely as long  
as the cavernous gulp  
from the whale's insatiable hunger.

### The Ruse of Mild Air

In this warmer than normal winter,  
the trees are budding early,  
in February's  
rain instead of snow.

I feel I ought to go outside  
and *bring* some soothing tea,  
*play* a tranquil song  
for harp and strings,

be the sandman for a spell,  
*send* the rousing leaves-to-be  
*back* into their shells,

lest the winds return from the north,  
puddles freeze over,  
and greening branches waken  
to a bird-less lie of ice.

## Poetasters

I've been told to never use *heart*  
in a poem.

It's worn, archaic, schmaltzy—  
used by all the *doggerelists*  
this workshop leader  
has warned us about.

It's right up there with *soul, love, yearning*.

*If it's in the poem you're working on,*  
she begins to thunder, *cut it out!*—  
using the image of a paring knife  
which *seems* a tad cliché  
(if I do say so myself),  
wondering how much rent she pays  
atop Mount Hypocrite.

I check her *curriculum vitae*  
at the break—  
stealthily, like a covert anti-lyrist  
*attempting* infiltration,  
masking the use of my smartphone  
as if I'm an iambic James Bond,

praying she *doesn't* suspect a thing  
while the others are out for coffee,

a smoke, obvious signs of stress  
while interacting with a demi-  
god: one who judges, demeans  
your silly muse, encourages your  
toil at a day job that's been dull,  
monotonous, sucks your *spirit*  
to the bone.

She's also wise to the way  
we would-be bards cloak *banality*,  
catches my synonym for my *psyche*  
masquerading as my *soul*—  
which, by the way, is counting down  
the hours till this hellish experience  
is done, wondering if I can duck  
out for an afternoon *root canal*.

When we finally reconvene, she rails  
against the *light*, how every single poet  
and their grandmother's fucking dog  
keeps spouting its tired truth,  
and if she hears the word *shard*  
just one more time,  
she'll break the user's neck  
like it's a fragment of fragile glass.

I wonder who it *was* that broke her heart  
(sorry, I mean *vascular organ*);

if she's ever been kissed  
under the shine of a faithful moon;  
if she'd know what it's like to have  
a mother die in her arms when she's only  
seventeen, and a father who'd fled at five.

At the close, I'm the first to offer what's  
written, wanting to get it over with,  
my teeth chattering like a typewriter  
on speed, my hands quaking  
as if *all* the tectonic plates  
were having sex,

the birdie in my treetop  
*fleeing* at that moment—  
terrified, vaporous, out an open window  
with several cracks all down the middle,  
believing it was to break  
into a million little pieces,

unable to reflect  
a summer sun  
that's no longer welcome here.

## Milestones

I missed my car's odometer  
hitting the 100,000 mark,  
despite my awareness  
it was coming, that at 99,999  
it was just a quick *jaunt*  
to the grocer's,

that I'd happily watch it roll,  
purchase a bottle of champagne,  
toast my Chevrolet's achievement.

But then I got distracted by  
a woman and her dog,  
how sexy she looked  
as she walked, wondering  
if she was single,  
if the calico kept her up  
with its incessant, midnight  
bark.

By the time I remembered to  
check, the number read  
100,001

and I cursed that damned diversion,  
that it could take me *years*  
to reach two hundred  
thousand Ks,

that I'd have to drive  
across the continent, say to hell  
with the price of gas,

that my eyes will lock obsessively  
on the dashboard,  
in the hours I'm getting close,

that I'll disregard the safety  
of other drivers, pedestrians,  
the moment I'm *within*  
the final roll, creeping at  
a turtle's vexing pace  
in NYC,

*ignoring* the crown of the Chrysler,  
its delightful Art Deco,  
the look of Lady Liberty  
from the road along  
the Hudson,

or if you find me in LA, that  
*Hollywood* will fail  
to get a glance,

that I'll never know how *right*  
the Beach Boys were,

about *California Girls*,

not daring to peek at their legs,  
the swaying of their hips,  
lest a second landmark moment  
fall to waste,

and I'm mapping out another  
winding trek,  
through the blandest fields  
imagined,

only risking that a *scarecrow*  
or a farmer's lovely daughter  
will snatch my gaze.

## Mahavira

I've fallen in love  
with every animal  
in the world.

So much so  
I'm unable to do a thing  
around the house.

You ask me to clean  
the windows so they'll  
shine, and I say that  
spotlessness will harm  
the backyard birds,

the thud of *slam*  
and sudden death,  
that I'll be triggered  
by the sight of feathers,  
a blue jay's broken neck  
and fractured skull.

Our vacuum is an enemy  
of *ahimsa*, that Sanskrit  
word of peace for every  
Jain, non-violence  
with every step, that I've studied  
Mahavira—

am convinced  
the spiders in our carpet  
smell of sentience;  
that to suck up their silky  
webs, their eggs and  
future offspring, would be  
nothing short of murder.

*Live and let live,*  
in all those corners  
we never look at  
anyway.

I'd wash the supper  
dishes, dust the counter-  
tops, if it weren't for the  
microbes and the mites,  
that they've existed  
much longer than we have,

that to disregard their feelings  
due to stature  
is clearly sizeist—  
they're in a universe  
all their own  
and we surely wouldn't like it  
if a colossus  
of cosmic proportions  
did the very same to us.

And the reason I refuse  
to cut the lawn? The mower is  
a guillotine on wheels,  
one that would make Napoleon  
cringe,

that the field mouse in the grass  
has done *nothing* to deserve  
this dreadful fate,  
that both of us  
will reap from lofty turf,

you with your toes  
in the soft of green,  
me with my feet  
on the ottoman,  
cheering when the quarterback  
is sacked, by the defensive  
end who's never squashed  
a bug since he was born.

## Bistro de Montréal

You're hesitant  
to check  
the bill of fare, *note de frais*  
it says  
in padded vinyl, recalling  
as a girl  
you'd ordered *consommé*,  
after your parents  
let you pick  
from the menu *en Française*,  
anything  
that you wanted,  
thinking it sounded cool,  
never catching the  
smirk  
from the maître d',

that you were left  
to learn your lesson,  
slurping broth  
and fallen tears,  
eyeing your siblings  
wolf *le hamburger*  
*et les frites*, with a slice of  
*à la mode*,  
your parents, their  
*crème brûlée*,

while you chose  
to play it safe  
and ordered nothing  
for *le dessert*,  
your mother's *rien*,  
*s'il vous plait*,  
delivered with an air  
of punishment,  
for your pouting  
and jealous gaze,  
for your failure  
with a language  
they had loved,

and you plotted  
a future meal  
when you were older,

worked your way to  
C in fifth-grade French,

when you gleaned  
a dozen mollusks  
from the garden,  
placed them  
on your parents'  
gilded plates,

that *escargots*  
would surely  
pay them back,

that *vengeance*  
is the same in either  
tongue,  
served best  
when *il fait froid*,

will take  
its sweetest time  
to come to pass,  
like a snail that needs  
forever  
to move a mile,  
careful not to crack  
its spiral shell,  
like a chicken  
and its egg,  
*un oeuf*  
*et un poulet.*

## **Victor**

Our friend prefers Victor  
to Vic. He has no patience  
for those too lazy  
to include the second syllable.

*What's the big deal?*  
he hears, from Steve  
not Steven, Dave not David,  
Mike not Michael.

His parents  
had stayed up  
throughout the night,  
just days before he was born,  
chose *Victor* over 100,000  
others, that they declined to  
save some dollars  
on the engraving of his bracelet,  
never falling to truncation,

that *Vic*  
was nowhere to be spoken,  
from junior kindergarten  
to MBA,  
birthday gifts unopened  
if a short-form had been  
scrawled,

saying  
it wasn't him,  
that he refused to wear a lanyard  
pre-scribed with Sharpie black,  
by someone who assumed  
it didn't matter,

and he won't check-in  
to the hospital  
on point of death  
if they get it wrong,

swearing  
the carver of his tombstone  
had better *etch*  
in all six characters,

just a single letter shy of  
seventh heaven,  
the luck of the dice,  
a wonder of the world,

that he really doesn't  
need to add a y,  
knowing that to him will go  
the spoils either way.

## Pockets

*I've got one hand in my pocket  
and the other one is playin' a piano*

—Alanis Morissette

I can never have enough pockets.  
I've bought a dozen cargo pants  
for the multifarious pockets  
that they boast. No other kinds will do.

I need a pocket for my keys.  
I need a pocket for my wallet.  
I need a pocket for my covid mask  
and ones for the notes I jot—  
with a selection of ballpoint pens.

I realize I've embarrassed you on dates—  
your slacks without a ripple  
while mine are hugely bulged,  
*sagging* from added weight:  
my plums and water bottle, my phone and  
cigarettes, the pair of Ralph Lauren—  
hoping the lenses aren't scratched  
by the deodorant I carry just in case.

I bring a bar of Dove, a folded facecloth  
with me when we're at the shopping mall—  
their bathrooms are notorious

for their running-out-of-soap,  
for their dryers on the fritz,  
that hygiene's more important  
than my wearing some haute couture.

And I've ketchup when we need it—  
the food court cutting costs,  
too cheap to include  
a packet with our fries.

I want *pockets* within my pockets—  
ones that securely snug my  
*Fisherman's Friend*, knowing I can't afford  
to drop them on the floor, how germmy  
that would be, though I have some *sanitizer*  
with me if it happens.

You tell me I should get a better system,  
like you with your nylon purse, that women  
are a walking *pharmacy*,  
have ten times more to carry  
than us males, have foregone the many  
pockets since the Holocene began,  
knowing *one* was a pain in the ass:  
for the desert kangaroo with precious lading,  
the knackered baby within,  
hopping along the outback  
without a means to ease her burden.

## Ratios

There are 20 quadrillion  
ants upon the Earth,  
at least that's what the experts  
gauge, and there's two-and-a-half  
million for every human.

I don't find that comforting,  
that there's fifteen fucking zeroes  
after twenty,  
that I'm somehow  
responsible  
for 2,500,000 ants,  
feel unsure of what to do  
with that amount,

and if my neighbour were to die,  
do I care for twice as much?

*Ants can look after themselves,*  
you remind me, speaking of their  
diligence, the way they stick together,  
that their antennae relay messages  
much faster than our texts,  
adding they could conquer us  
anytime, if they really wanted to,  
from their colonies around the house,

that they're content  
to simply go about their business,  
hard-working communists  
that they are.

I feel the need to get away,  
where I'd forget about the ants,  
do some tourist kind of things,  
take in New York City in the fall,  
breathe the *crisp* of Brooklyn air,  
find all of the varied spots  
where *Seinfeld* had been set.

Seated behind your laptop,  
you declare there's over  
two million rats in NYC,  
that it's not as bad as it sounds,  
say there's *four* of us  
for every *one* of them,

that we could saunter  
through Central Park,  
extol the spectrum  
of the leaves,  
*catch* some vintage jazz  
in Greenwich Village,

while we wonder if these  
vermin know the ratio,  
that it actually falls  
within our favour,  
every time they migrate from  
the sewers, join us on the subway,  
risk our baited traps,

if that bite of smelly pizza's  
really worth it,  
for them, for us,  
and the anxious Italian baker,

who never checks what's crawling  
around his feet.

## Algorithms

After thirty years of struggle,  
I've penned my *masterpiece*.  
It's the poem I can gloat is *perfect*:  
funny, heart-wrenching, born of  
blood and sweat  
with not a hackneyed phrase  
to be found.

I call it my magnum opus,  
think I've *reached* top-  
echelon, that I'll have to  
conjure up a way to make my  
humble brag sincere.

It's flawless in its cadence,  
accent after accent,  
but to attract the *avant-garde*,  
I've thrown in extra lines  
that            look  
         look            I  
                         o  
                         o  
                         k  
like  
                         this

knowing it's *innovative*,

that if *everyone's* being innovative  
it's still called innovative,  
and to fail to see my *genius*  
means you're clearly just jejune.

I *refuse* to send it to a journal  
unless they publish it *right away*,  
allow me to pick the font  
and put my face upon the cover—  
*filtered*, the one that sweeps the  
crow's feet from my eyes,  
masks the freckles that haven't faded,  
turns my grey to lightning blond.

I post it in a *hurry* to my accounts,  
wish the Facebook, Twitter crowds  
could have *seen* it in the making,  
like watching *Rodin* sculpt his *Thinker*,

that I should have up-  
loaded the entire process,  
let them see the brandy  
that I guzzled,  
as if I were drinking  
Dylan Thomas under the table.

After half-an-hour, I wonder

why it's still without a *like*,  
that it probably isn't showing  
in the *feed*,  
that it's all a conspiracy,  
between Musk and Zuckerberg,  
that what Penelope put  
on her fucking toast  
is considered more important;

that they're the lowest, common  
denominator, the *plebeians*, who  
wouldn't know a chef-d'œuvre  
if they stopped and *sat* on it;

that all the other poets are simply  
*jealous*, afraid I'll show them up,  
that they'll look like grade-school  
jinglers compared to me,  
that I'll crash their open mic,  
say to *hell* with allotted time;

that *Auden* is put to shame,  
that I've trumped his *Icarus*,  
that no one will give a shit  
about his wings from here on in;

that the ship will thumb its nose  
instead of sailing calmly on.

## Sister Doreen

paced up and down the rows  
between our desks,  
yardstick in her  
grasp, ready to rap  
the knuckles of our hands,  
should we dare to grin or  
sneer, fail to pray *Hail Mary*  
without the reverence  
She was due.

Behind  
the school at recess,  
we surmise  
she's never had sex,  
been a frump since she was  
eight, wouldn't know a  
condom from a balloon.

She greets us back  
with a snarl,  
ever-scanning for  
mockery,

bellowing *wipe that stupid  
smirk  
off your face!*

And that's the moment  
when you did it,  
took a napkin from your  
pocket,  
dragged it *across*  
your curling lips,  
your mouth then a rigid  
line, like the *pews*  
at Sunday Mass,  
or the cross above  
the Confessional,  
in which you'll enter  
the day before,  
offer remorse  
to the forgiving  
Priest,

who'd met the Sister  
years ago, when she was  
a *postulant*,  
one who took a binder  
to her breasts,  
a practice  
she began at  
13 years, after her  
father began to fondle  
her in the dark,

shoved his hand  
between her legs,

in front of Mary  
cloaked in blue  
upon the wall,  
who later offered  
solace, a place  
where she was shielded  
from the touch,  
where the only  
naked man  
she'd ever see

was nailed above her head,  
in wood and then in  
gold around her neck,  
unable to lift a finger  
in the night.

## Spoken Word

I definitely feel out of place,  
at this late-night poetry  
slam, over 30 years older  
than this crowd of teens and  
twenties  
who are speaking  
their bitter truth:

the fracture of relation-  
ships, the lines of intersection,  
narratives  
of racist taunts  
and kicks  
to the fucking head  
(from the anti-queer brigade),

and it's not that I can't relate—  
*fag!* tossed my way  
from all the kids  
now grey with age, playing  
sudoku by the fire  
but that's *another* shoddy  
poem I'll likely write—

for within this present moment  
Naomi has hit her stride,  
hooking me along  
with her inflection,

familiar as it is,  
an echo of a hundred thousand  
poets who rarely glance  
upon a page,

or don a pair of glasses  
sliding down  
along their nose, one that's  
burrowed in a book  
these flashy vogues  
have yet to read,

and her eyes are seared in mine,  
perhaps wondering  
why I'm here,  
so straight and pale a visage,  
so Luddite  
without a phone,

that I've likely never heard of  
Twitch and TikTok,  
knowing that I'd be lost—  
especially in the latter,

where every word's a beat,

every syllable  
always locked  
in recollection,

where youth and fleeting beauty  
pirouette,  
in the shadow of a *bomb*  
that's failed to show,  
for generations,

of which poets  
abandoned birds and blooms  
to howl against its menace.

## Sébastien

The artist exhibiting his work  
in this dingy, downtown gallery  
paints nothing but bowls of fruit.

Maybe he has some other  
themes in his vapid repertoire  
but all that's here  
from wall to wall  
are bowls of fucking fruit,  
ones so dull and trite  
he should have handed us  
espresso as we browse.

In a whisper,  
I ask you if he's ever read  
the news, notices the homeless  
in their rags a block away,  
a mother selling her body  
near the stoplight, kitty-  
corner to where we're trapped,  
unwilling to cause this dilettante  
offense,

that we're pressed  
by etiquette  
to act like we're  
enthralled,

eyeing every  
stroke, insipid tint  
and tone,

that we'll be obliged  
to tell this boring hack he's great,  
we'd *love* to take his card,  
maybe purchase something later,

but before that dénouement,  
here's a banal bowl of apples  
to make us think  
life's peachy-keen,

*forget* the Black youth  
gunned by cops—  
*here's a pair of*  
*avocados*

and the Residential  
"schools"—  
*bananas have never*  
*looked better*

please don't speak  
of genocide—  
*the plums still have*  
*their pits*

and the earth getting  
hotter by the hour—  
*see the orange*  
*and its arc,*  
*how fresh it looks*  
*in my vessel,*

*its sweetness in my mouth*  
*once I've put my brush away,*  
*kissed the photo of my wife*  
*snapped a day before she died.*

## The Mona Fucking Lisa

After a single session,  
I already regret my *sign-up*  
for this ekphrastic poetry  
course, cursing to you  
the assignment I was given:

*Mona Lisa, the fucking Mona  
Lisa, like that hasn't been done  
a gazillion times*

and yes, I won't be able to fake it,  
that everyone and their mailman  
knows her visage,  
are well-versed in da Vinci's flair,  
and their lofty expectations  
will be something I can't deliver.

You ask me what our poet friend was given,  
the one who always gets the lucky breaks,  
and I tell you the *Voice of Fire*,  
three lines of blue-red-blue,  
vertically trite and prosaic,  
that no one's ever heard of Barnett  
Newman because he sucks,  
that I could have scrawled a sonnet  
on my kindergarten days,  
on a pair of simple colours,

how the Gallery  
had been fleeced in '89,  
caught up in the avant-garde,  
how 1.8 million  
could have gone to help the homeless,  
paid for their chalets  
and pedicures, covered  
the cost and tip  
for their tortellini  
Bolognese;

but as it is,  
I have to *sleuth* my way  
behind that Delphic smile,  
invent a tale of Giocondo,  
that Leonardo  
tried to paint her  
minus mirth and maturation,  
in 1499,  
when his subject began to sob  
from pent-up grief, reliving the death  
of her baby daughter,  
his *Moaning Lisa* a work of art  
the Renaissance ignored  
(bathing in their beam  
of erudition), that even Machiavelli  
said *chin up, she needs a grin*;

that when the *time*  
arrived to try it all again,  
da Vinci made a jest,  
a side-splitter, that Lisa barely  
smirked at his ill-timed droll,  
that he hadn't a clue  
how it felt to love and lose,  
consumed as he was with  
innovation, invention,  
his maps and magnum opus,

failing to heed  
the red of blood and life,  
her blue, blue mood.

## Contractions

I say our spell check's  
rather daft  
to underline in red  
my use of *amn't*.

I am not impressed  
when you tell me  
it isn't valid,  
despite the Irish  
lips that speak it,  
adding it's a stunt,  
to inflame  
the English snobs,  
the ones who lift  
their crumpets in the air,  
sing *Charles is our King!*

*Amn't I your girl?*  
Joyce in *Ulysses*  
came to write,  
and none would dare  
to insert an  
*erratum* slip,  
citing it as *err*.

*You're not in Ireland*  
now, Boland as a  
girl was told  
when she sprung the word  
in class,  
immortal now in verse  
she penned  
without a second thought,

as will I, in a poem  
that even you'll  
refuse to read,  
unless I *write*  
a second draft,  
for a sharp-eyed  
London editor,

who has never set a *foot*  
in Cork or Dublin,  
one who knows a typo  
when they see it.

## Ennui

I'm bored.

This would be  
a terrible time  
to scribe a string  
of words.

It might be better  
if I depicted  
my mood as *ennui*—

then at once  
I'd pique some  
interest, from both the  
writer (that's me) and the  
reader (that's you)

but maybe not, that the  
word's been used  
en masse,  
in a slew of  
poetry chic,

that it's  
trendy to slip it in,  
our scrawls  
without a muse

though we could say  
it's the current *zeit-*  
*geist*, leaving us at the  
periphery

which all sounds  
kinda cool, but still a *bore*  
nevertheless,

that it's the proverbial  
worse-than-death,

whereas the end of life  
births epics, sagas,  
ones to last millennia

while my staring at the wall,  
at paint that's been  
dry for years,

is hardly  
conducive  
to legend,

unless a Frenchman's  
ghost, invoked,

the one who coined  
the term,

on a week  
he sat *alone*,  
watched the sloth-  
like ascent of grass,

before he could  
summon  
the word to describe it.

## Barky McBarkface

is mailing it in today,  
his half-assed *ruff*  
a far cry from his  
usual barrage of  
WO-WO-WO-WO-  
WOOFF!!!

when his teeth  
are keenly bared,  
sharpened by the  
*years* of crunchy bits,  
his tongue a hanging  
sock that's soaked  
in drool,

and we've been  
grateful  
for the window  
that keeps him in,  
on his human's  
upholstered couch,  
intimidating  
*any* who venture near,

who worry he  
might smash right through  
the glass, devour the flesh  
right off their bones,

ones he'd calmy  
chew  
come the slaughter's  
epilogue

but not *today*,  
his head barely  
lifting from his  
post, where his daily  
sentry duties  
have kept the neighbours  
on their toes,  
literally—

a ballerina's step  
to check the mail,  
a soft and trepid  
creeping to the car,  
an *exhalation*  
once they've locked  
themselves inside,  
repeating the  
scenario  
but in reverse,  
when they've returned  
to their driveway  
with a gulp,

but for *us*, on our  
pleasant constitutional,  
the one he *normally*  
interrupts,  
we worry that he's  
sick, that decrepitude  
and wear  
have settled in,

that we *won't*  
know what to do  
come his passing,  
won't know what to  
speak of  
when the birds are  
melancholic,  
when the air  
is dense with sweat, the  
clouds a brim of black  
before they spot us,  
walking 'round the bend,  
a *flash* and peal  
of fury to be unleashed,  
one that scares us  
shitless, warns  
us to keep our distance.

## **"me too"**

When I tell you *I love you*  
you answer "me too"

and perhaps I misconstrue,  
that you love *yourself*  
like the affirmations advise,

the ones we see on Instagram,  
that Rupi Kaur is full of them,  
churning them out like some poet  
in a fast-food window,

where you pick up a side of  
"you're better off without him"  
plus some platitude on the rain  
to wash it down,

or maybe "me too" is a memory,  
in the (not so) recent past:

an abusive ex, a diddling dad,  
the gymnastics coach who always  
held you snug, checked out your  
*ass* instead of your landing,  
after vaulting and parallel bars;

but then I've always read  
too *much* into your words,  
thinking there's some story  
below the surface,

a recollection  
that encircles like a shark,  
that you're afloat  
in a punctured dinghy  
awaiting rescue,

by an aqua knight who rides  
the seven seas, one who sees  
a kraken where there's not,

thinks "right back at you,"  
"ditto kiddo"

is the beast of a thousand  
fathoms he's come hastily  
to slay.

## Magic

The final line of this  
poem no longer  
exists. It was surely there  
for the taking, its fingernails  
clutching rock, at the  
top of a ragged *cliff*  
from which it hung,  
a *Wile E. Coyote*  
in the making.

This poem's final line  
is a bar of *soap*  
in a steamy shower,  
pushed *away* from my  
hand by its slime,  
ready to trip me *up*  
the moment it  
falls, my eyes closed tightly  
from the suds of cheap  
shampoo, its lie of *no more*  
*tears*.

The final line of this  
poem is a cheeky *kid*  
playing hide-and-seek,

concealed behind the  
curtains, waiting for me  
to open—

then disappear  
like David Blaine.

Dear darling of a  
brat, I promise not to  
harm, will only *borrow*  
what I need to make this  
grand, let you vanish  
in the air

once I've wrenched you  
from my hat  
by your fluffy ears.

## After the Eclipse

It's there,  
in our walk around  
the crescent,  
the sign a golden  
diamond:

*Blind  
Child  
Area*

one that's weathered  
from the elements,  
from the creep  
of rust and age.

It's *been* here  
long enough  
for the kid to be grown-  
up,

and now we  
look around us  
left and right,  
spy the houses  
and their trees,

the veranda  
on which he sits,  
in the vivid  
imagination  
of our minds,

tinted Ray-Bans  
on his eyes,  
their black *opacity*,

in his lap  
an open book,  
the white of  
pimplly braille,

perhaps a 19<sup>th</sup>-  
century classic,  
or the latest from  
Stephen King,

subduing his depression,  
his lack of intimate  
sex,

his hearing  
sharp as ever,  
as it was when he was  
six,

right after he  
lost his sight,

when the footsteps  
of the aphids  
piqued his ears,  
the wings of moths  
to follow,  
even spiders  
threading webs,

and now,  
if he could sense us,  
the heaving  
of our breath,  
the thump  
of our assumptions,

bursting  
through our chests  
like the roar of an  
atom bomb,

the flash of which  
would blind us  
unless we looked  
the other way,

as we'll do in just  
a moment,  
when we think we've  
seen him waving  
from a porch,

the one on which  
he rocks,  
wistfully,  
cacophonous  
amid the quiet.

**Chuck Barris**

That guy from *The Gong Show*  
is dead.

I only think of it  
because there's a portable  
gong in this antique store,  
way out in the country  
where we say we're never judged.

The only reason  
for a gong like this  
was to summon someone for supper:  
an irritable granddad, conceivably,  
much too hard-of-hearing  
to heed a vocal call  
to consume.

I don't know how a *gong*  
came to symbolize  
artistic failure—  
a juggler dropping eggs,  
their shells now sticky shards;  
a ventriloquist  
flapping his lips  
like wind-blown ensigns  
on a ship;

a gorilla-suited singer  
cracking notes  
in drunk falsetto—

the padded mallet swinging  
really an act of *euthanasia*,

sparing  
would-be performers  
further jeers and rotting fruit,

its reverberations longer  
than a verbal shout to stop—  
but not so cruel and caustic.

And then there's  
Gene Gene the Dancing Machine—  
never allowed to finish  
his minimalist moves,  
cut off by a *commercial*  
before his inner Fred Astaire  
could be unleashed,

score three *10s*  
from adjudicators  
who were always on time  
for their dinner.

## Sui Generis

*It's never the same sky*  
*twice*, I remark,  
on this walk that hugs  
the river

and you're right to cite  
the saying as a riff  
from our former  
Sensei, who spoke of ripples  
in the water and the  
debris that's carried  
away,

and I'm sure he thought  
the *same*  
when it comes to clouds,  
each wisp and configuration:

like there, the horns of a bull,  
one that mimics Taurus  
in the night, when again  
the combinations—

*endless*, like a lotto  
with only a fixed amount  
of balls,

their digits dropped  
by the *push*  
of gust and gale,

their numeric, Arabic faces  
granting wishes,  
like a genie  
freed in the desert—  
from a bottle swept  
by something we cannot see,

where there's *never*  
a nimbus in sight, a stream  
that surges through, and the stars  
a phantom tease,

that under their fleeting cool  
we swear the patterns are alive,  
inspire us to entreat  
upon the first we see  
each dusk,  
as if the billion proffered up  
by all the children of the Earth

*never* go unanswered,

as if the mothers and  
their dead arose  
when early morning sun  
was at its lowest,

like a Christ who strolls  
the streets of Jerusalem,  
His blood on cobble-  
stones

barely even dried,

mistaken for a Ghost  
who answers prayer  
to this very day,

with the holes that  
grace His palms,  
the rivers  
gushing through,

astonished He holds  
the whole world in His hands.

## Longing for Charlton Laird

The best thesaurus  
I've ever had  
(and yes, I'll admit  
that I use one,  
that I can't  
fire off  
five-hundred  
thousand words  
from the front of  
my fucking skull)  
is a *Webster's*  
*New World*  
*Thesaurus*

by Charlton Laird,  
2003 edition,  
one I had to tape  
like a doctor  
closing wounds  
on the battlefield,

and I've been  
hunting  
for an updated  
version ever since  
(though mine *boasts*  
it's "completely new" —

a one-time *truth*  
now faded lie),

well, sleuthing  
as far as  
bookstores  
will allow,  
and that a google  
search will take me,

only to discover  
Charlton died  
in '84,

making me wonder  
how he'd done it,  
invoking *synonyms*  
while in a coffin  
(or as a forlorn  
heap of ash  
in someone's urn),  
figuring  
what to say  
in place of *life*—  
though life *itself*  
had slipped  
on through his fingers

(well, if he still  
had them that is,  
boney as they'd  
be).

I feel as if  
I should name him  
as co-author,  
of all the poems  
I've ever scribed,  
knowing some  
of the searing verbs  
belong to him,

that I might have  
uttered *heart*  
instead of *pith*,  
if not for his suggestion,

*old* rather than  
*seasoned*,  
which may have  
caused my wife  
a bit of offense,  
the spark to end our  
marriage,

though I might have  
won her back  
with my *enchantment*  
in lieu of *love*,

that my little extra  
effort  
regained her favour,

a sprinkling  
touch of magic  
from the pages  
in my hand,

that I've never  
believed in ghosts  
until today,

his sibilance of  
nouns  
providing rescue,  
from another  
tired lyric,

his antonyms  
a warning  
to watch my step,

that what I'd thought  
was a flawless term  
is in fact  
the *opposite*,

that I'll die from  
embarrassment  
if I use it,

join him in that great  
Athenaeum in the sky,

our conversations  
locked  
in pregnant pauses,

each of us  
trying to conjure  
the perfect word.

## Untitled

I asked if you'd  
come up with a  
name for the poem  
you've been writing  
and you answered *not yet*,

annoyed by my  
response: *great title*,  
*succinct and*  
*to-the-point*,  
which was super-  
fluous, I know,  
as well as most  
unfunny,

which reminded  
me of the moment  
REM were *Out of Time*,  
to conjure the *name*  
of their new LP,  
that Warner  
unwittingly *broke*  
the creative block,

that I too  
have seen the crag  
of muted stones,

the words that failed to  
topple  
off my tongue's  
precipice,

like the night  
I was unable to  
speak, *anything*  
of love, if I loved  
you, if it thrust into  
my side like a lance,  
staked my wooden  
heart inside a  
coffin,

that in the agony  
that is silence,  
all I could finally  
manage: *not now,*  
*I'm sorry, not yet.*

## The Blues

*Got to pay your dues  
if you wanna sing the blues*

—Ringo Starr

I'm melancholy enough to sing the blues.  
There's surely no shortage of sadness  
to birth despondent, lyrical quatrains;  
my voice just a coke & crackers away  
from that gravelly, soulful sound  
that makes an authentic virtuoso.

But then there's my name—  
with no notable ailment or physical loss  
to grant entry to that Hall of Misery:

*Blind Lemon Jefferson, Peg Leg Howell,  
Cripple Clarence Lofton, Blind Willie Johnson,  
James 'Stump' Johnson, Leukemia Louis Brown*

Let's be perfectly honest:

*Stubbed-Toe Charlie* doesn't cut it,  
and *Runny Nose Ron* isn't worthy  
to strum of endless pain and woe,  
to garner empathy from the folks  
who'd pick *Chess Records* from the stacks,

their singer in midnight shades,  
who knows of poverty, oppression, infirmity;  
that I in my tripping-over-the-cat  
can *never* comprehend.

## Humidex 54

We hear it's getting  
hotter, our eyes that look  
to the atmosphere alight;

our star's becoming brighter  
we surmise, though it isn't even  
half-an-inch  
closer than before. We can't see  
the carbon filling  
skies like lungs with smoke.

There was a time  
the fires were small:

to cook a trout,  
to keep from  
being *cold*  
in the coal of  
night. Now, B.C.  
is ablaze, and another  
starlet's mansion  
is consumed.

It could be worse, you say—  
we could be pilgrims  
doing circles  
down in Mecca,

robed from head to foot,  
or roofers hauling shingles  
in our sweat,  
the streams of which  
taste bitter  
like Deadeast Sea,

when blinding sun  
and sorrow are the same,  
*brothers of another  
mother,*

when all beneath the surface  
comes to burn—water then coral  
then fish—

when all around us  
swirls like a malted  
shake, loosened  
in the melt,

frothing like a madman  
in the clouds, a wave that's  
run amok  
and drowning millions.

## On the bliss of our collective ignorance

Let the *Fur*,  
*Zaghawa*,  
*Massaleit*,  
mean nothing at all to us.

Let *Darfur* remain a reference,  
vague, to be sometimes heard  
as filler, when what's cooling  
on the back-end  
burner is calmly  
condescended to,  
allowed a scant  
half-minute of mention.

Let a late-night  
documentary  
on the pulse of genocide  
give its nod to west Sudan,  
to the region  
that was touched upon  
earlier in this poem.

Now flip the jarring channel  
just as quickly as you can,  
as if a commercial's  
annoyance,  
an interruption,

a splash  
in the sleeping face  
of our complacent, crass TV.

Let the villages be burned  
and watch their women, raped by gangs;  
let the *Janjaweed*  
wield machetes  
and the children lose their limbs—  
we only save for oil.

Let the camps swell up  
like a wave, crash  
from overcrowding,  
stomachs cave and bulge  
and the sickness be unnamed:

it's hard  
to remember  
each one,  
easier, by far, to say

*we did not know about it,*  
*we did not know about it,*  
*davon haben wir nichts gewußt.*

## **St. Christopher's Playground**

That boy  
who plays alone  
is a future poet,

the way he throws the ball  
against the wall  
betrays it best:

a bounce against the bricks  
and rolling past  
the other kids—

none to pick it up  
for him, landing in the mud.

Look at how he cleans it:  
his sleeves absorb the earth,  
the water,  
the melding of the two.

See its mock rotation,  
still wet with residue,  
its slow and soggy spin  
cupped by his wobbly,  
sodden hands,

giving time  
for phantom people  
to get off,

the ones that stay behind  
to write the reason  
they cannot jump.

**The excuse I use  
to avoid cleaning under the stairs**

How lonely it must be  
to be a spider in the basement,  
one that's sitting on its web,  
in a corner without light,  
awaiting that *rare* arrival,  
the hoped-for, off chance encounter,  
when an insect-thing  
will venture where it knows  
it really shouldn't,  
get trapped in sticky white,  
kick its hair-like limbs  
in a panic,  
sensing deep-down in resistance  
that the end has inevitably come,  
there's no escaping this alive,  
feeling the webbing  
beginning to bounce  
as its maker at last approaches.

I sometimes have to wonder  
if the spider ever pities,  
considers *mercy* for a moment,  
seeing its tiring victim struggle  
in the seconds before the kill;  
being tempted,  
not by pangs of some *compassion*,

but by those of *isolation*,  
supplanting that of hunger  
and its drive to feed and hunt;

taking an instant to say *hello*,  
in its sly, spidery way,

enjoy the twinning breath  
of *company*,  
a meeting of insect/arachnid eyes,  
wish it could *share* a tale or two,  
get to know this flying creature,  
fellow cellar-dweller, *better*,

hope there's no karma-bearing grudge  
or vengeance *doled* by divinity,  
that its prey will understand,  
know the slaying isn't personal,  
that the pinch and bite are quick,  
that the blood that's drained  
is a *gift*,  
gratefully received,

that *calming* sleep comes first,  
so deep in life's last ebbing  
there'll be the precious chance  
to dream.

## Rodentia

My landlady is ranting  
about the squirrels,  
how they dig up all her flowers,

calling them *tree rats*,

that all of us would hate them  
if it weren't for their tails,  
how bushy they are,

their skill at being cute,  
adorable, the *way*  
in which they nibble.

I try to give them credit:  
that they don't crawl  
out from the sewers,  
pillage our provisions,  
leave dark *droppings* on our floor.

*Name a plague traced back  
to squirrels,  
the time they carried fleas,*

*stowed away  
on Spanish galleons,  
kindled contamination.*

In addendum  
I mention *Willard*,

its sequel in '72,  
remind that *Ben* goes hand-in-hand  
with Michael Jackson, whose life  
was a horror all its own.

Yet I still admit defeat,  
that no one's ever  
crooned to a bounding  
squirrel,  
that it would never  
top the charts,  
be in a position  
to redeem,

rain disdain  
on those below  
who curse its splendour.

## Saturday

The backyard birds  
have competition.

I came here  
to hear them,  
their morning melody,  
rousing like a symphony  
with a wind-blown branch  
as baton,  
small and so frail,  
severed off a tree  
by a sunrise gust  
from the south.

The men next door  
are re-roofing their house,  
hammering shingles  
while their radio blares  
a wicked country brew:  
a cacophony of twang  
and Texas drawl,  
with *she's-a leavin' me*  
*behind in muh tears*  
accompanied by their raucous  
talk and the snap  
of beer-in-a-can.

I pluck weeds from the garden,  
ears straining  
for the inimitable notes  
of nature,  
wishing the robins  
could drown  
the pedal steel,  
the pedestrian  
commercial pap,

that their crescendo  
devour  
the chorus of nails  
and *woe-is-me*,

stain the fresh-laid black  
with white  
when they are finished.

## On Solving the New York Times

The broken bits of pencil  
only spoke of your frustration,  
and it wasn't from the headlines,  
the *Pax Americana* and things  
pertaining to Trump.

Your seething led you stomping  
to my door,  
to the greying goatee clippings  
left unswept. To the empty bottle of rye  
I'd purposely hid, miserably.  
To every quip and inane joke  
expressed at breakfast.  
The Cream of Wheat is burnt  
and *I should have made it myself*.

You play it taciturn,  
and I go out for a timely jog,  
feigning smiles to the neighbours  
in case they heard us fight.

Darling, do a complex  
crossword  
just for *me*. Squeeze in words  
not yet invented.  
Damn the dictionaries  
to a mangled heap.

Scribble

"I never loved you anyway"  
and find a synonym for *lies*,  
in your thesaurus,  
before that too is discarded  
as my heart  
in *seven down*,  
*twelve across*.

## The Wisdom of Rice

*Don't pity the rice*  
Aunt Josephine  
had said,  
during her usual mirth  
and merriment,  
and we wondered  
what she'd meant.

Now, with news  
of her earthly passing,  
her mantra is remembered  
and its meaning,  
made clear:

*Rice, my children,  
will likely fall to the floor  
as it's poured,  
a grain that's grown  
for nothing  
and yet it grows,  
in tawny fields and tall,  
the height of pride  
and triumph;*

*not concerned if it's crushed  
by a farmer's boots  
or spit aside in mills;*

*neither worried if stuck  
to the bottom of pots  
nor wedged between the teeth  
of a fork;*

*and, if it's not to be consumed  
as food,  
it will leap in the air  
in a second of joy,*

*to be trodden  
by a bridegroom's shoe,  
perhaps caught  
in a wedded wife's veil,*

*swept in a pan  
by a janitor's broom,*

*resume its endless celebration  
with the dust.*

## Past Life Aggression

Perhaps I was a ruthless *Khan*,  
vengeful, without mercy,  
who cut down peasants  
by the thousands,  
taking an unsheathed sword  
to young mothers and their babes;

or I may have dwelt in dungeons,  
coaxing heretics to confess,  
beat remorse from wicked witches  
and any soul who wouldn't kneel  
at the foot of the Papal throne.

Was I simply just a gadabout  
who cheated on his wife? A *rogue*  
who left his children  
for the warmth of a harlot's touch?

Did I ridicule the Crown,  
crudely scrawl on Cambridge walls?

Did my horse  
trample *Queen Anne's Lace*?  
Had I ignored its defecation?

My dearest, would-be betrothed,

is the reason for your “no”  
the fact I deserted my troops in the war?  
Had I fled from German flags,  
escaped an ambush out of fear?

Or was I incredibly initiative instead—  
start a firestorm in Dresden,  
drop a Nagasaki nuke?

Did I watch as the Chinese starved,  
give my approval to the Red Star State?

If so, please forgive me my transgressions:  
taking the Name  
of the Lord in vain;  
my callous *killings* of the innocent;  
my drunken, playboy ways.

Impart to me your pardon,  
your blessed, fragrant kiss—  
not the one that Judas gave  
but the caress of *Juliet*,  
the embrace of *Bouguereau*, eternal;  
the one that ends the cycle, trips up  
karma at the finish line.

## Like Darwin Among the Gods

Christmas, and the word became flesh  
on our scribbled, Scrabble board,  
an empty bottle of wine  
and a record strumming chords so calm  
in lieu of breeze or fire.

"Calvinist" to your "random,"  
with "stop" and "go"  
branching out,  
feebly, with little imagination  
or points.

And we discuss  
the interconnectedness  
of all things,  
how life is tangible—  
dependent on dice and chance;  
how the meeting of hearts  
is coldly decided  
by the lefts and the rights,  
the ins and the outs,  
of daily mundane doings.

Look, a physicist is born  
because a young cashier has smiled  
at a completely foreign stranger;

had he foregone the pack of gum  
you say, he'd have married another woman,  
who'd bear a son  
that serves hard time—  
20 years, no parole, no remorse.

Watch the atoms collide at will  
and all the faces disappear;  
observe the cells dividing,  
for they too will reach dry land.

When Reverend Tucker  
quotes the scriptures, he says  
"I ain't no ape."  
Show him how his sins hold fast,  
how he fails the Lord of mercy,  
how he strains at gnats—eats camels,  
ignores the tailbone of his ass.

If I leave you, my love,  
at 10:03, I'll make it home in peace,  
write a tender song for you,  
how your scarlet locks are streams,  
flowing to and fro' in dreams.

You'll be enchanted,  
consider my proposal,  
say "yes" for all it's worth.

But please, don't let me tarry,  
say a word or phrase ill-thought:  
for if I go at 10:04,  
I'll catch a damned red light,  
my car side-swiped by drunkards,  
my chest pinned to the wheel,  
legs crushed,  
spirit floating somewhere  
to a place of God's own choosing.

And it is there, as Dante warned,  
amid the howls and shrieks of loss,  
I'll die a second cosmic time  
from a flash of what would  
and should have been;  
your breath pulsing on in bliss,  
the ignorance of the not-yet-dead.

## Bread, Blessing of Birds and of Widows

In the park,  
one of the pigeons  
stands by the wayside,  
watching the others  
devour the bread  
you've shred and tossed  
about our feet.

*She's in grief*, you say to me  
with conviction,  
recalling my scolding  
from an hour ago  
(for your leaving your lunch uneaten).

You add that her mate was likely killed  
by a lunging cat,  
or maybe its wing was fractured  
and it took days to die,  
unable to fathom  
why the sky  
suddenly seemed so far away,  
indifferent  
to its laboured hops,  
its failure to seize  
what was cast:

seeds of melon, sunflower,  
bits of broken crust.

## **Juanita**

The email labelled as “junk”  
by my vigilant catcher of spam  
says “dearest one”  
in the subject.

Though I wish it weren’t so,  
I confess I don’t recognize  
the sender,  
Juanita McTavish,  
of Spanish-Scottish descent  
no doubt.

She’s indicative  
of the many others  
who send me junk,  
all with unusual names  
that speak of cultural  
intercourse:

Vladimir Cobb, Horatio Singh,  
Mumanabe Parker,

all just saying “hello,”

or the pleas from the African rich,  
from the widow of Todd Buwakadu,  
who left so many millions

she doesn't know where the hell  
to put it.

I then decide to add  
all of the missed opportunities  
I've had,  
all of those British lottos I've won  
but never bothered to send in my claim,  
always *hastily* deleting the message  
because it's labelled *virus B.S.*;

why I've suffered through all my ailments  
when the cure is found in the link,  
the one so kindly included  
since my sex life  
is *Mannfred's* concern.

But getting back to the matters  
of heart,  
my Juanita's endearing message  
that's been clicked and purged, unread;  
I'll wait if another is sent,  
if I'm still her dearest one,  
and perhaps I'll take a chance,  
those one-in-a-million odds,  
ignore my email's discerning filter  
and see if tonight true love  
be mine.

## Socks

The *most* insulting reason  
you can give  
for declining an invitation  
is that you have to fold your socks  
(or maybe rearrange  
their drawer).

There's nothing exciting  
about socks.

They look plain silly  
in sandals,

wearing white  
a winter *faux pas*.

The only heed  
I pay them  
is when I check they're not  
mismatched.

I'd never give a pair  
on Christmas Eve,  
or Valentine's,  
or even Office Workers' Day;

and what they cannot  
and will not be,  
*aside* from a token of love,  
is an excuse from a family function  
or an escape from a date  
that's made,  
with the girl you think is  
homely,

the one you'd like to flee from  
though you've never checked her out  
below the knees.

## Trumpet Player

Trumpet player,  
hold your note against the backward mind  
of the corps of your oppressors,  
stomping off to office towers,  
cubicles and charts.

Do your solo  
on the spur,  
the squall of sound  
that lets us know  
the anger of your race,  
the family left behind  
in run-down walk-ups.

Sweat from your brow  
under hot blue light  
and rail against its calm.  
Tip the scales both low and high  
and do it poetically.

Trumpet player,  
play for *her*,  
the one you loved, now gone.  
Make it seem  
that flags have dropped  
with sailors dead at sea.

## **Anthem**

The path to peace it's said  
is found in sacred books of old,  
on parchment, scrolls and ink;  
in a choir's hallelujah,  
ringing bells and fervent prayer.

Let's scribe our wishful reveries,  
our old prophetic songs,  
say the bomb will never fall;  
that police will join the protest  
and the judge will grant a pardon  
to the Indigenous kid in chains.

For it's not that hard to add a verse  
and paint a pretty picture:

Governments disband,  
there's no more need to demonstrate,  
and prison gates swing open,  
those who leave bear violets,  
while violence drops as dust.

Faith begets trust,  
trust begets love,  
and the one who was your enemy  
brings you candy in the night,  
saying all is calm in Jerusalem,  
and flags are neither waved nor burned.

## **As Spring Yields to Summer**

I only see her when she's out,  
the woman across the way,  
pushing her lawnmower  
that has no engine,  
the grating of squeaky wheels,  
its whirling, rusty blades,  
the sound of a hundred haircuts.  
A fumeless, slicing symphony,  
the grass wafting fresh  
and green.

Day and night  
through my windowsill  
and all is  
as it should be:

cat eyes narrow to slits  
at the first burst of light,  
squirrels play tag,  
bumblebees collect, send static  
through the afternoon,

dogs howl at three-quarter moons  
and backyard Copernicans  
marvel  
at the shadows on lunar scars.

A couple kiss and rock  
on gently swinging seats,  
embrace, sigh into sleep,  
and dawn comes back again,  
announced by startled yawns  
and singing larks.

As Spring yields to Summer,  
tulips slump head-first,  
vibrancy fades, reds go rose,  
goldenrod yellows,  
joining the ordinary  
around us.

There's my neighbour  
riding his bicycle, narrowly missed  
by a milk truck,  
Ms. April May receiving delivery,  
twice weekly, half a quart,  
that, and measurements  
long thought dead  
still heaving  
their penultimate breath.

## Hawaii

The summer gusts  
are making Lake Huron  
look like the ocean—  
and I envision for a moment  
surfers roaring to shore  
at Waikiki  
and this landscape littered  
with high-rise condos,  
beachfront Hiltons  
where the conifers are  
and the skateboard kid  
a gofer  
for the drug runner  
up in the penthouse.

There's little sand to spare  
when tourists congregate  
by the thousands and  
thousands of miles away  
from that fantasy  
I'm suddenly grateful  
for this water's low salinity,

that it's free of sharks  
and jellyfish stings,

that the jetlagged couple  
who'd stomp on my towel  
aren't here, too rude  
to say they are sorry.

## Church Bells

The steeple bell  
from the Anglican church  
chimes every 15 minutes,  
doing a double at the bottom  
of the hour, and nothing short  
of a concerto at the top.

I check my watch  
and it's 2 minutes ahead  
of what I hear,  
on par with my smartphone  
and the shortwave station  
that's purportedly set  
to an atomic clock.

They say on WWV  
that it's accurate  
to within a nanosecond  
every 3 or so million years,  
though I doubt  
the Australopithecines  
who must have got it going  
could have foretold the competition  
from Rolex, Samsung, and the Rector's  
reliable ringing  
just a block-and-a-half away;

that these simple-minded crosses  
of ape and men  
could have envisioned accuracy  
above that of God,  
that His House of Worship  
is 120 ticks behind the times,  
that I haven't a clue what to do  
with that brief but priceless allotment  
that the good Lord, if He is right,  
has given me.

## The City

The city you say we hate  
has grown on me now  
and I feel no enmity with it.

And I walked today,  
through the city you say we hate.  
I stepped in snow  
and slipped on ice  
but I didn't really fall—  
a railing there to rescue.

It was cold today, in the city  
you say we hate,  
and the homeless sat  
on sewer grates  
and felt the heat blow up.  
I thought it ranked of methane  
but there wasn't an explosion.

I was accosted,  
in the city you say we hate,  
by a man panning for coins.  
*No change, no change, no English,*  
*no change,* I shook my head at first,  
then turned and flung two quarters at him—  
from the both of us,  
though I knew you'd disavow.

A fire truck roared past me  
in the city you say we hate.  
Its sirens screamed like murder  
but then that would have been the police  
and there were none at all in sight.

A house must be aflame,  
in the city you say we hate.  
I hope right now it's vacant,  
with a mother and child away,  
shopping, or on a visit to a friend.

If it's you who've befriended,  
tell them not to worry,  
that there's a hydrant  
on the corner where they live;  
that all will be rebuilt  
by kindly neighbours and their kin;  
that they needn't feel embittered,  
blame the gridlock, shunting trains.

Tell them, while you too  
have time to love,  
a little.

## Curbside Café

I thought she watched me  
as I wrote,  
a girl with beret cliché,  
Irish cream and lemon Danish,  
who'd smoke a cigarette  
if legal  
but it's not;

and she's reading *Schulz*  
and Robert Frost  
and the many roads to heaven  
and I thought to ask her what she thought  
of love and death and living  
amid our own sel-  
fish carte blanche.

She wasn't there, really,  
nor am I—we weave and thread  
and move about  
as atoms from the sun,  
that settled here so predisposed  
to birth and fear and loathing.

I see her sometimes, singing praise  
when the moon  
is halved

and if the evening tide  
pulls cold,  
when the waitress looks for dollar tips  
and the closing chimes  
ring sweet;

and I have no time to end the verse  
with lights that cue to leave,  
the sax that fades to hush,  
and the cop who walks the beat  
looking through  
the tinted glass,  
ideally dreaming  
of a night  
without a single  
shout or crime.

## The Porpoise

*That's  
not a dolphin,  
our niece and nephew  
complained,  
wiser-than-the-norm,  
their hands and faces  
pressed  
upon the aquarium's  
massive glass.*

That's  
when I felt sorry  
for this poorest chap,  
the porpoise:

sent to the  
ocean's  
second division  
for its blunt and rounded snout,  
its smile not as cheery  
as its beloved,  
famous cousin,

without kids  
to toss it a ball  
with which to balance  
and entertain,

few to care  
if it's caught in a net  
that's cast  
to sweep our tuna,

lacking loving liberators  
to mass upon the sands,  
newsmen  
leaving its beaching  
on the evening's  
cutting-room floor.

We decided to take the children  
on a hired boat one day,  
sat still in the calm of the bay,

waiting for dolphins  
to show,

watching for fins  
that slice the water  
always reminding us  
of the sharks,

wishing for leaps  
that announce their arrival,  
the happy grins  
that say *we're here*.

## **Maybe**

When you turned to me  
and raised your brow,  
I too made a face.

He sauntered past:  
grey, dishevelled,  
second-hand clothes  
still rank with beer and smoke.

The little girl beside him  
was clean and bright  
and smelled of soap.

Maybe he was her father  
or her granddad.

Maybe a stranger she befriended  
as he panhandled,  
in front of the candy store  
a block away.

Maybe he had a few coins to spare  
and bought her gumballs  
instead of the cigarettes  
we assumed he craved.

Maybe he was gentle  
and didn't fondle her at night  
when owls made their perch  
and roosters knew their time  
was coming.

## ***Errata***

sounds so chic  
I almost yearn  
for that fatal flaw,  
on the printed page,

denoted as a footnote  
'fore the text,  
or on a photocopied  
slip that slides within.

In real life,  
there isn't such a  
lovely-on-the-tongue descript:

*Error, Mistake,  
Bone-headed Blunder;*

their speaking  
ever caustic  
from the lips,  
their hearing  
so acidic  
on the ears.

Soothe my wrongs  
with word, my dear,  
with Latin  
that is kinder;

let others know  
there's beauty  
found in failure,

in the remembrance  
of my sins.

## Seven Day Rental

One of my students borrowed  
*La Maison du Plus Pied*  
by Jean-Pierre D'Allard,  
telling the rise, fall  
of the Sainte Bouviers,  
ensnared by riches,  
hatreds spawned  
and business won, lost,  
won & lost.

She recounts her favourite scene  
towards the end,  
where a liberated Marie  
slaps the face  
of brutal Serge, her husband,  
played by an aging  
Stephane DeJohnette.

It's the one-eighty,  
the turning point for both characters,  
the moment where love  
drops its transcendence,  
its fixed and static state.

I think Anise, my student,  
sporting occasional welts  
that I ask nothing about,  
has found a muse  
to lift her trampled spirit  
as she says  
*the film, the film.*

Yes it is such.

## **Grandfather's Room at the Greenwood Nursing Home**

The caregiver warned us  
about curtains,  
how they keep  
the sunshine out,  
that Venetian blinds  
are preferred,  
allowing the light  
to seep in slowly  
in your sleep.

This residents-wish-they-were-dead place  
never ceases to depress.  
And it's more than just the usual  
smell of urine.

Watch us watching  
watches  
and ponder lame excuses  
to leave.

You're somewhere else  
entirely,  
a decade ago  
we think:

*Let me try and show you  
how the Gordian knot  
was solved*

and

*We'll sing Opa  
Opa Opa*

like when Nana  
slipped out  
from beneath us.

## Poison Ivy

The lawyers had stamped and signed,  
the executor divvying up  
what was left of her possessions,  
and content or so we thought,  
we paid  
a belated call  
to the scanty cottage  
she'd called her home,  
two rooms of creaky floors  
and a kitchen more mildew than tile.

Grandma's abode  
had been neglected,  
no one paying visits  
while she rotted her final days.

We expected something pretty,  
the irises we were pledged,  
the gladioli and ripe persimmons,  
not the brambly knots of branches  
free of foliage,  
prickly green  
popping up  
where the perennials once had stood,

leaving us to wonder if the bulbs  
had birthed a miracle,  
somehow dug themselves  
out of their dirt,

snuck *away*  
in the thickest night  
while the owls and bats bid adieu,

and later  
found the graveyard  
where she rested,  
draping her headstone  
with dangling blooms

as we took out  
our corroded spades,  
our hoes and bending saws,  
and cut away the chaff,  
wiping foreheads  
with our forearms,  
soaking in our inheritance.

## The Child

Yes, yours was the most unusual  
of reasons,  
to avoid the city playgrounds,  
the parks where noisy children  
race amok.

*One of these little boys  
will be the death of me* you said,  
singling out  
the preschool lad  
on the base of the monkey bars.  
*A murderer,  
when he's all grown up,  
one of them has to be.*

You quote statistics, demographics,  
the laws of happenstance.  
*Look at his cherub innocence,  
that ice cream-covered face.*

For whatever wayward reason  
he will turn,  
despise a younger sibling,  
his mother's scolding ways,  
learn that knives can do much more  
than slice an orange, butter bread.

You'll pass him on the sidewalk  
in the future,  
your purse will tantalize,  
sway with every cane-abetted  
step,

or, on a night you're even older,  
you'll *answer* fervent knocks,  
shed your caution  
when it's due,  
his blade upon your throat  
upon his entrance,  
no hint of recognition,  
no sub-atomic  
memory  
of your eyeing his every  
leap,

when he fell  
upon a stone  
and you were near,

stuck a bandage  
where he'd bled.

## **The Monk of St. Marseille**

Your prayers  
are duly recited  
in the Latin you learned  
while young—

yet still  
you fail to forget her,  
your unrequited  
love,

her voice a melodic  
scale, sacred  
as Gregorian  
chant,

without brass  
or string  
to accompany,  
divine in its naked key.

## The Violinist

I'll wait for you in the foyer,  
alit by a chandelier,  
and streetlights seen  
from the window sill.

I'll be sitting  
in the velvet chair,  
an antique too good  
to touch,  
but hardwood floors  
should not be soiled  
by shoes I've muddied in the rain.

As I dry,  
your lesson will come to a close,  
and the student that you love  
will leave some angel cake  
as thanks,

for teaching her Dvořák,  
his cycle of *Cypress Trees*,

perhaps  
unknownst  
of its origins,

how Antonín  
was inspired  
to write it,  
loving Josefina,  
his pupil in Prague,

watching her marry another,  
leaving a muse  
to scribe his work.

You will keep her gift  
in the freezer,  
not daring to warm  
in an oven,

eat,  
and be left  
with only the crumbs.

You'll buy tickets for two  
to the Symphony,  
the Number 6, in D Major,  
with me as reluctant guest;

and from  
a concealing balcony,  
you'll boast of your protégé,

that she's a cellist,  
violinist, as well.

You'll say the pastoral  
sequence to come  
is her finest musical moment,  
her strings ascending the others  
in an overture to *you*,

and it's only the ill-timed  
coughs from the audience  
that keep me from hearing it  
as so.

## Aurora Borealis

In the north, at this peculiar season,  
at this time of cricket-night,  
we'll see aurora borealis,  
the waves of greenish light  
on grand horizons.

I think of stately trees,  
if *arboreal* pertains to Heaven  
and you tell me that it doesn't,  
that it's terrestrial,  
that the trunks and spindly branches,  
with leaves that fill each top  
as *diadems*,  
are simple, silent observers  
of the celestial show above.

I mention *holidays*,  
the one we're currently on,  
if the calendar takes note  
of the kaleidoscope ahead  
and again I'm deemed confused,  
that the planting of oaks and elms  
has *nothing* to do with the stars,  
that *Arbor Day* is christened  
with a shovel and a spade.

A final, blazoned variant comes to mind:

*Aurora*, with radiant, emerald eyes,  
a daughter's perfect name,  
one that we'll hold onto for the future,  
as a *tribute* to the swirls  
of cosmic glow,  
ones that dance aloft,  
soundless and angelic.

## Slavic

The couple behind me at this outdoor café  
speak in a language I strain to distinguish—

perhaps it's Czech or maybe Polish,  
their inflections rising and falling  
like the scales from an innovative pianist,

or it's possibly the Ukrainian  
I think I recognize  
after surmising I've heard "varenyky";

and I imagine the man is telling the woman  
that despite the many trials of his day,  
he is lucky and blessed to have her,

that when his boss yelled at him earlier  
he thought only of stopping at the florist  
on the way here to meet her,  
hence the arrangement on their table  
is *his* doing,  
not the proprietor's,

that even though  
all the other tables in this place  
are crowned with pink and red zinnias  
and the varied shades of phlox,

this was merely a case of the waiter  
having mimicked what he'd seen  
when this Slavic-speaking pair  
were the only ones here,

before myself  
and the other patrons arrived,

talking to each other in a tongue  
that kept no one guessing what was said  
as the late-day sun began its daily descent  
behind the jagged skyline in the distance.

## Methocarbamol, 1500mg

I'm unable to open  
my tiny bottle of pills.  
No matter the effort,  
the creases of *strain* upon my face  
and its fervent flush of red,

no matter how forcibly  
I *push* the cap down, twist it to the side  
as instructed, it simply won't release  
its chalky stash.

There is *tamper proof*, *child proof*,  
and then there's *paranoid*—  
that a *psychopath* might taint  
this guarded cache, laugh  
in his mother's basement as I gag  
on *arsenic*, wishing me well  
in hell.

I picture Sisyphus on steroids,  
his inability to *budge* a puny pill,  
its supposed stoney ascent,

and the child of the Hulk  
and Hercules, teeth clenched in frenzy,  
veins *popping* under the skin  
of his brawny arms,

as this vessel begins to *mock*  
with its modest plastic,  
its illusion of simplicity,  
that a little old lady from church  
sprung these oblong captives free;  
that he was cocky, overconfident,  
that he'd finally met his match.

Oh, did I tell you? The meds are *muscle*  
*relaxants*, designed to loosen the grip upon  
my back; that I am powerless to *bend*,  
touch my toes; that a game of *Twister*  
is out of the question;  
that I'm even going *barefoot*  
since it's *impossible* to pull up my socks;

that this agony of exertion  
*exasperates* my condition,  
is another prime example of the  
cure being *worse* than the disease,  
one it swore would be vanquished,  
with an eight-ounce glass of water  
filled with ease from the kitchen sink.

## Rumours

These juicy *pineapple*  
*tidbits*  
are up to speed  
with the latest gossip

or so I quip,  
as we divvy  
them up  
in bowls,  
one for you

and one for my  
idiot self—  
remarking  
I've heard the  
*pears* are splitting up,  
that one was caught  
in a morning  
tryst with a fig;

while cerise  
did *ooh-la-la*  
with some Auckland  
kiwi rogue.

And the coconut  
from Manila?

It ran *off*  
with the melon's  
daughter, mixing  
its *milk*

with the seeds  
we always  
spit *out*,  
like the *crétin*  
from the streets  
of Bordeaux,  
who taught the  
*bona fide* way  
to *cracher*,

and that *pineapple*  
in French  
is *ananas*,  
confused  
with a tropical  
lech,

the one that's  
sheathed  
in yellow, boasting  
of the length of  
his sweet everything.

## Penny & The Englishman

Look right up the sidewalk  
and you'll see her—with her tired,  
spectacled eyes  
and split-end hair of greying brown.

I tell you that she's *still*  
as pretty as sin, stands in line  
at all the busy transit  
stops, hoping one's his get-off point  
but it never seems to be.

She's bled her life away  
I whisper, as if some kind of game,  
a starling's secret,  
misadventure  
played to the nines  
and tarnished dreams made  
bright—by a single jiffy wipe.

One fine day  
she'll spot him in a flash,  
pick him out  
from the morning throng,  
and then we'll pause  
for overtime, to see if the wait  
was worthy  
and if skin that's pruned tastes rich.

## Meter Maid

*Lovely Rita, meter maid,  
nothing can come between us*

—The Beatles

The parking meter has ripped me off  
again. Granted, a quarter doesn't buy a lot  
these days, 12 minutes  
in the crumbling core,  
and there's little I could have done  
in that paltry span:

watch a person score some meth, perhaps,  
or a behemoth lumber towards me  
with his biceps freshly inked;

or maybe spy the hoodied teen  
in front of the *Cash and Dash*,  
with all of the windfall  
from a senior's cheque.

Shaking this rusty contraption  
accomplishes nothing—neither does  
thrashing the part that promises  
each Sunday will be free—  
which does me no *good*  
on this middle-of-the-week  
kind of moment.

I'm *yearning* for the world  
that's gone *away*, in which Petula  
Clark had sung to go *Down-*  
*town*;

storefront *windows*  
filled with stock,  
the bustle of suits and dresses,  
a cop directing traffic,  
with seldom a skateboard seen.

I would have waited  
for *Lovely Rita*  
to arrive,  
the heat from her sultry sway,

her expunging this metal rogue  
of the piece of *change*  
it stole from me,

saying it *buys* a leisurely stroll,  
a chance to see the sun  
ascend its zenith,

with plenty of time for coffee  
at the shop around the corner,  
or maybe *lunch* and herbal tea,

that she'll join me  
once she's dispensed with  
all her tickets.

## The Shower

The pounding on the door  
says *hurry the hell up!*

Have it your way, dear:  
I'll emerge with hair unkempt,  
still wet but apple-scented.

I swear I didn't mean  
to use the *last* of your shampoo,

my eyes were *shut* when I groped,  
while I palmed the bottle's nape,

like that *time* on a wobbly  
ladder,  
five or six years old,

*stretching* for autumn fruit,

in Uncle Richard's  
country orchard,

afraid of slips and falls,

of biting into worms  
should my *feet* be firm,  
unfailing.

## Silenzio

The g in Paglioni  
is apparently  
silent,

with the i  
the sound of e  
(robbing it of  
a kingly lion's  
mane),

while the e itself  
is long and clearly  
Italian,

though *we'd* have  
guessed it simply  
by the décor,

the bottles of Abruzzo  
on the wall,  
the scent of fettuccini  
in the air—

but this *isn't*  
consequential,  
it's not a *Yelp*  
review,

it's all about  
the g  
and its refusal  
to hold its weight,

its obsession  
with its stealth,  
its channelling  
Marcel Marceau,

or like the cat  
of Cary Grant,  
scaling the many *roofs*  
*To Catch a Thief*,

that it should be  
*rooves* instead of  
roofs, like hooves  
and a single hoof,

that the horse  
has got it right  
despite its *neigh*,

the shyness  
that comes and  
goes,

inside our alphabet's  
seventh letter,  
hooking us *along*  
either way—

soundless as a feather,  
roaring  
like a Roman  
god.

## Achilles

The name our  
friend has chosen  
for her mastiff  
is sublime.

We wait to hear  
the inevitable:  
*Achilles, heel!*

Almost *invulnerable*,  
were it not  
for a patch near his  
paw;

able to sniff  
out a cad,  
*any* boorish  
lout  
who makes a pass.

We envision  
a vivid  
scenario,

picture him  
by her side,

at the *Apollo's*  
*Pharmacy*,  
a box of Trojan  
love balloons  
snuck discreetly  
in her purse,  
the one she got  
on Etsy,  
made with  
*vintage*  
'80s horse hair,  
as if some  
stealthy *turnabout*,

hoping a heroic,  
Grecian Spartan  
will ascend  
from *The Illiad*,

the copy she keeps  
by the fire,  
beside a dog-  
eared *Ancient Myths*,

with two  
glasses of  
*Muscat Blanc*,

one for *her*,

and one for a  
woman's best friend,  
beside her with  
his vicious mouth  
agape, a cave of tongue  
and teeth,

ready to *bite*  
on his arrival,  
sit back *down*  
if she commands;

lick the spot  
below his calf  
as if to pity his  
single weakness.

## The Tortoise

takes it personally  
when called a *Turtle*—  
scantily referred to  
in poetic lore;  
remembered  
as a laggard,

for its excessive  
*longevity*—  
over one-and-a-half times  
a centenarian,

seeing kings and  
kingdoms fall,  
new countries  
arise  
from the smoky  
dissipation  
of war. Surviving both Castro  
and the Queen  
and a dozen-plus  
Presidents  
in-between.

You've endured,  
dear tortoise,  
all of your animal friends  
(if indeed you had any)—

and at funerals:  
always the deathmaid,  
never the death.

You were there,  
creeping over a log  
when the Wrights learned  
how to fly, then  
awkwardly stretching  
your wrinkled neck  
to see the moon  
in '69;

and still, as the unburied  
decay and scatter,  
you linger, freeze-  
framed around the world  
by an iPhone's mocking  
meme;

and you recall  
when it was *new*,  
these devices for  
distant speaking,

hand-cranked,  
then dialed numerically.

Only the trees  
can tell your tale,  
that you once  
were young and spry,

plodding a *quarter-*  
foot a minute  
while the wild west  
was won,

spending evanescent  
moments  
*within* your crusty shell,

that you were  
far more sociable  
than we think,  
a jokester by the pond,

and yes, *you* were the one  
that bested

the rabbit's  
cocksure cousin,  
one with a similar  
problem  
and a homophone  
of hair,

*getting*  
little respect,  
*shamed* by losing a  
race so long ago—

that to you was merely  
yesterday, your single  
instance of glory,  
the only act to *outlive*  
your endless aging.

## And Then There Was Light

With your hands wrist-deep  
in fertile soil,  
you tell me your  
infant daughter died  
at break of dawn,  
on a day that our star  
rose without hindering cloud;

and you mused that early morning,  
as you sadly went and found her,  
stiff as a *Hasbro* doll,  
her unblinking eyes  
locked upon the ceiling,  
that to call it “sun” is a misnomer,  
for it’s connected to *Mother* Earth,  
and either “u” or “o”, it says the same  
masculine thing.

It’s the *female*  
that reproduces,  
you said, gives seeds  
a place to call home.

“Daughter,” you decreed,  
*call it Daughter.*  
It will surely love us more  
and our weeping will be greater  
on the days it isn’t there.

## Franklin, 2.0

It's only the beholder's  
eye, you've said,  
that makes you  
do the things you do—  
giving an appellation  
to every roach  
that's crossed your path,  
believing they'll  
inherit the Earth;

every cavity in the corner  
with a piece of camembert—  
not a single trap in sight.  
A mouse deserves much better  
than processed cheese.

We thought you mad  
when you spurned each  
*opportunity—*  
to *rid* the rooms of  
spiders, the eggs of  
*brown recluse,*

that venom's miscon-  
strued, like the snake's  
out in the desert of  
New Mexico,

where you hugged  
every cactus like a  
cat.

The spawn of every  
fly you'd dubbed *Mag-*  
*nificent*, said the rat  
was just a chipmunk  
in our scraps—  
that fleas were entertainers,  
jumping like acro-  
bats. And the creatures  
of the night? Their bite  
just means *I love you*,  
which you uttered  
in the halls of junior  
high, to the girl  
who called you *gross*,  
*disgusting*, a *zit face*  
*to the max*,

that day you  
came out of the rain,  
head and shoulders  
slumped like letter *f*,  
hands and mouth of  
mud from kissing worms.

## Embryonics

Potential  
is overrated.

It's the flip-  
side of what is  
*possible*,  
the call of  
tails and heads;

looking so  
*pendulous*—  
leaving you  
embittered  
by its dangle.

It's the fetus  
in the womb that  
might have made it—  
lost in a *tumble*  
down the stairs.

It births your  
feeling *guilty*,  
for failing  
to make the grade,

for bringing forth  
your parents'  
disappointment,  
forever *shrouded*  
in the umbra  
of another.

It's the tease of  
what-can-*be*—  
if the ducks  
are all aligned,  
at a carnie's  
game of chance;

the fifty-fifty  
pluck  
of *she loves me*,  
*loves me not*;

the toss of  
luck and sevens,  
the *dots* of their  
constellations,

overlooking pines  
that scale the sky,  
as if they long  
to kiss the stars;

or the poem which  
craves to lift itself  
to reach  
the crescent moon,

rest its weary  
hat upon its hook.

**“google it”**

When you asked me for  
the best Italian bistro  
in this city, I answered  
*google it.*

That day on the beach,  
as you peered into the  
murk of knee-deep  
water, you asked me if it  
was safe to swim in,  
and I responded *google*  
*it.*

Dalini's had a slew of  
great reviews—its ambience,  
its al dente and  
pinot noir, its well-earned  
Michelin stars;

while the lake  
had tested positive  
for bacteria, the kind  
that makes you sick,  
and I was relieved to  
stop our plunge  
in a matter of moments,

singing the praise  
of the county's  
daily testing  
regimen.

I reply to your  
every question  
with *google it*.  
There is nearly nothing  
that the search  
cannot answer—  
and yes, I imagine  
you think me *lazy*,  
*terse*, that my lexicon  
is void  
of romantic words.

But when you ask me  
if I love you  
I say *google*  
the centipede,  
how it never  
runs out of  
legs,

*google* the single  
polar bear on ice,

*never* bearing  
to leave it  
until the final  
floe has melted,

and please *google* the man  
in Uzbekistan,  
becoming a widower  
at 21,

never remarried,  
never missed a daily  
graveside visit,  
and when he turned  
one hundred and one,  
worried the world  
would run out of flowers  
before his final, doleful  
kiss upon her name.

## Woman, or Incongruity

*one*

Your mother was alluring in the nude.  
I say this because her photo album  
was left upon the table. Did shyness  
overcome her when she  
picked up the pics at the Fotomat?

We are the only creatures, clothed.  
The others haven't a stitch  
and we say we are enlightened?

All of us are naked in the shower.  
I don't mean at once, in the same stall.  
Just the thought will make us wince.

Back to the earlier point  
about the clothing.  
Do the children who sew for a pittance  
make it *sanctified*?  
Was the cotton picked to the lash  
the sign of some godly *purity*?

*two*

*You* are the one whom God  
should have made in the beginning.  
A more admirable name  
for each animal,

winding in a way  
that only a river  
and a *woman* possibly can,  
the curves of breasts  
and hips,

someone the Lord  
would not have said *no* to  
regarding what's in-  
between the leaves—

a fruit  
no tree of knowledge  
can ever take from you  
again.

*three*

I pluck the olives from the salad  
and that makes it less than Greek.  
I retain the blocks of feta  
and consider *German-Jew*.  
It's *been* an oxymoron  
since nineteen-thirty-three.

Bring me beer from Bavaria  
and hot latkes from the slum.  
I'll gladly prove what *cannot*  
go together.

A frown is a smile  
*standing* on its head.

Feet are a pair of hands  
*unwilling* to clasp in prayer.

Toes are cognisant  
that fingers are more lovely—  
so they *never* stretch for the sky.

Unable to grant any light of its *own*,  
the moon is but a mirror for the sun  
in which to worship its own reflection.

What is *ugly*, anyway?  
Is it the absence of beauty  
or too much of it all at once?

## Angelica, Artist

She went  
the light  
ekphrastic:

not of Rembrandt  
or surrealist  
Dali, Warhol's  
tomato soup,

had no stomach  
for van Gogh's  
ear, Pollock  
a breaded fish;

knowing Picasso  
had no rhythm,  
da Vinci  
without a rhyme,

while her solitary  
Rockwell: *I always  
feel like  
Somebody's  
Watchin' Me*

as she pushed her  
4B pencil  
into the thin of  
onion skin,

became her own  
inspiration,  
stick people  
galore, joining  
their fingerless  
“hands” —

page after page after page,

told the farmers  
to plant more bulbs,  
every single word  
a thousand pictures.

## APE

I always  
pull my punches  
playing Scrabble—

just this after-  
noon, for instance,  
with a potential  
triple-word,  
my holding back an

R  
that spelled out  
RAPE,  
like what you went  
through years ago,

my laying down  
instead  
a tail-less primate,  
beating his savage  
chest, seizing by force  
the female  
of his choosing,

then again, *no*—

to *imitate*,  
to *mimic* the tenant  
below us  
doing laundry,  
her bulging, puffy  
cheeks  
much like a  
chipmunk's;

the one who's  
scrubbing the crimson  
from her nightgown,  
while we're busy  
with our chuckles,

who scrubs and scrubs  
and scrubs  
when no one's looking.

**Monday, 7am**

You greet me with  
*Morning*, never  
*Good Morning*—  
like you did when  
hearts were younger.

*Morning*  
rises from a  
horizon, like an inmate  
from a metal bed,  
nothing to cushion  
his nightmares—  
sentenced to relive a *life*  
that isn't a life—  
the cursing, the welts,  
the bruises;  
the slop passed off  
as food;

the absence of  
*privacy*,  
when one needs it the  
very most,  
gone with the  
gurgle of a flush.

*Good Morning*

is harkened by  
glows, the lilt  
from a lark  
at dawn,  
the gradual  
lift of the light,  
each moment  
far brighter  
than the last.

*Morning* is stating  
the obvious, the drudge of a  
turtle-drive,  
the blaring of  
horns at red,

a finger in the  
air  
from the car  
that passes  
on the right.

It's the demand  
from your boss  
to get cracking,  
the indigestion  
from the eggs, expired,

the coffee from *McDonald's*  
too acidic,  
the leaving of  
your kitchen  
without a kiss.

*Good Morning*  
is the merge  
of fervent lips,  
the ecstasy  
of a lingering  
hug, a taste  
from the dreams  
before,

the confession  
of a love  
that never wearies,  
never reaches  
for a cup

until the curtains  
have been opened  
and you stand  
in gaping awe  
at what's to come.

## Ad Magnam Ultimo

*I'm so invisible  
here  
I'm starting to think  
I'm one of those dead  
people who don't know  
they're dead*

at least that's  
what I typed, on AssFace,  
the folly of Zuckerberg,

and the only  
reason I'm jotting this  
is to never be  
*never was.*

Instead, see me beneath  
the banyan, inhaling  
its verdancy,  
like a monk  
beside his incense,  
envisioning  
Bodhisattvas,  
telling the birds  
*that's enough,*  
I've scribbled of you  
ad nauseum—

have nothing at all  
to show,

not even a fourth-  
place ribbon,  
from the women's  
church bazaar,

and it was *there*,  
in the basement,  
where the Vicar  
did his deeds,  
the syphilis that  
we thought he got  
dormant now for ages.

Say again?  
*Unpunished*  
is no good act?

I talk to you  
of baseball, the Pirates'  
Roberto Clemente,  
his plane that plunged  
on the eve of  
'73,

the Nicaraguan  
aid that perished  
with him,

that if he didn't give  
a shit he might have *thrived*  
till '24,

yes, the year we're  
currently in, where I tread  
past the tents of the homeless  
swelled en route to the hockey  
game, the one on the  
screen at the pub,  
plunk a pair  
of 20s down  
so I can gin-it  
but in style,

and after the cup  
is won, go up  
to the park  
to find me, as blue  
gives way to black,  
*naming* distant  
suns that are pinned  
upon it, as though it's  
*never* been done before,

as if they're children  
who could have *lived*, if it wasn't  
for famine and plague,  
for Franz Fucking Ferdinand,  
for the dominoes  
which keep on falling  
in his stead:

see them there in Gaza  
burned alive,  
in the bones  
of the Holodomor,  
in the tattooed arms  
of Jews  
who should have blossomed  
otherwise,

Anne Frank  
a *novelist*,  
while Germans  
come to call, ask her  
for autographs,

and me, tallying up  
the galaxies  
while waiting to finally  
die,

feigning  
I've a *son* who's counting  
with me, darkness  
in his eyes  
where all the starlight  
would have been.

## Meditation

The trickle of a  
stream's serenity,  
the pan flute's  
halcyon lull,

reveals to me  
it's Zen  
(which is acceptable  
now in Scrabble,  
though that isn't the  
point of this poem).

These sounds are  
warmly emanating  
from one of those dime-  
a-dozen CDs,  
the kind you find  
at a dollar store,

which help you to  
*relax*,  
loosen your every  
limb  
like a limp elastic.

I *have* the open  
window in the  
summer, the cardinals  
and the blue jays  
joining to *suggest*  
I stay in bed,

forego another  
*chill pill*  
in the din of  
afternoon,

but I miss them all  
when it snows,  
become grateful  
for a disc  
revealing *spectrums*—  
in just the  
right light,  
at just the  
perfect angle,

the one in which  
the chickadees  
have joined  
the Sangha's chorus,  
the Tibetan  
singing bell,

even in the  
pall  
of a murky  
winter,

virtuosic *birds*  
which are twittering:

from the boughs  
of a cut-  
down tree, felled  
since the distant *copy-*  
*right* of 1993,

their lifespans having  
ended  
before this thing was  
even *shrink-wrapped*,

that it's all a  
piss-poor *substitute*,  
for a living, breathing  
flock, that Enya would  
sound like Anthrax  
if *juxtaposed*, against

this insipid meander,

which would even make  
an *elevator* salesman  
cringe,

and I really don't  
wanna sleep my  
entire *Saturday* away,  
whittle my way at  
the ponder of  
stupid koans,

and not only *that*,

it's yet another  
painful example of  
how death and its sluggish  
rot can have the gall  
to sound so *soothing*—  
so fucking, fucking  
soothing.

## Not Even If I Was the Last Poet on Earth

This is a pretty  
crummy way to say *finis*,

when every lark  
and every oak  
have passed away,  
with the *rest*  
of our tired clichés:

The ocean  
and its ships.  
The mountains  
and their snow.  
The poems  
becoming worse  
than even *this*—

when the final  
bard on earth  
hasn't a rhyme  
to go with the times—

waits only for the *red*  
and swell of Sol,  
a sonnet on the sun  
that swallows *every-*  
*thing* in sight:

my pen,  
this book,  
the love I vowed  
would *be* forevermore,

blinded by the *flash*  
and burn of light, in the blink  
before the dark  
in which they're one,

when promises are  
pitched into the void,  
that we've named it  
*Space*  
for a reason,

and did you *honestly*  
expect a happy ending?  
What if I shared my joke  
about the chimp  
and flugelhorn?

What if it *actually*  
made you laugh?  
What then?



## Notes

p.78 *Watchful* The sculpture by Walter Allward referred to in the poem is on the front cover of this book. I took the photograph while living in Stratford, Ontario.

p.127 *Algorithms* The final six lines are a take on the second stanza of W.H. Auden's *Musée des Beaux Arts*.

p.172 *On the bliss of our collective ignorance* The closing line of this poem is in German.



The author of over thirty books of poetry, as well as one of short fiction and another of art & photography, Andreas Gripp lives in London, Ontario, with his wife, Carrie.

## Lauds and Laurels

I've always admired the progression in your poems and the way they move, effortlessly, from a quaint or innocuous observation to their unlikely dénouement, the way you succeed in always turning a thing on its head! I love the sweeping twists you deftly wring out of your closing lines, at once so obvious in their necessity and altogether out of left field. Spontaneous and clever and always a refreshing surprise!

—*Teresa Daniele, author*

I love your craftsmanship, your sense of rhythm, and deployment of consonance and assonance and internal rhyme. It's poetry after my own heart, poetry that dares unabashedly to be beautiful when discussing hard things. Poetry that knows that rolling your car and landing upside-down in a ditch gives you a new perspective on the ground above and the sky below.

—*Richard-Yves Sitoski, Poet Laureate, Owen Sound*

The poetry of Andreas Gripp takes hold of readers like a beguiling scent, evoking both nostalgia and the transcendence of memory

from the moment it is apprehended. This is poetry of common life, a relatable and lyrical poetry which propels itself like a song newly sung yet undeniably familiar.

—Chris Morgan, *Scene Magazine*

Your poetry has an uncommon, common touch: it touches something in each of us, gives us a word, a phrase, a picture that we can easily relate to. Poetry that does what poetry is meant to do: communicate!

—Carol A. Stephen, *author and poet*

The lyricist of our nation, determined to give the oftentimes untold stories of personal tragedies; the conveyor in the most exquisitely personable language of seasonal wisdoms; and perhaps among the leading spokespersons for the reinstatement of the poetic voice in contemporary verses ... as good as the American Poet Laureate, Billy Collins.

—Conrad DiDiodato, *author and poet*

Reminiscent of Cohen but more biting. A gifted, eloquent, and very brave bard ... He speaks to us in a way that earlier poets never did—he doesn't coat the moment in platitudes

but bares it in our shared and uncertain humanity.

—*Katherine L. Gordon, poet and author*

Andreas has the ability to connect with his readers through the easy flow and mastery of his words. He is one of the best poets in Canada.

—*Patricia Shields, author and poet*

I've been browsing through your poems with immense pleasure. Your wry take on our everyday, ordinary doings is sharp and engaging. Your understated wit brought a smile and the shock of recognition. You illuminate the quotidian.

—*Don Gutteridge, poet and author*

Andreas Gripp is a master of cadence, transforming the daily prosaic into poetry.

—*Penn Kemp, poet and author and inaugural Poet Laureate of London*

Edgy, muscular and musical, with a nice dash of the absurd. Great work!

—*Mike Madill, poet and author*

Your poems are so full of life ... fun to read!

—*Anna Yin, poet and author, former Mississauga Poet Laureate*

You are my favourite living poet, no disrespect to all my other favourites because they are dead. I don't say that lightly, having shelves of poetry books. We won't mention the living writers because it's not fair to compare when I adore your writings so.

—*Amber Dawn Pullin, poet*

I like the human feel in particular in Andreas' work. When I read him, I feel as if he is literally sitting next to me, talking to me sometimes with cynicism, sometimes with love-longing, and sometimes with corset-splitting humour.

—*Gina Onyemaechi, poet*

You are to me the best poet of the century. I have never read a poem of yours I did not like.

—*Karina Klesko, editor and poet*

POETRY / \$15.00



Beliveau Books  
ISBN 1-978-927734-42-1